

The Columbus Dispatch

Editorial: Lighten the burden

Bills targeting childhood obesity in school could pay future dividends

Thursday, May 20, 2010 2:58 AM

Ohio lawmakers appear on track to approve legislation that would bring the state's schools to the forefront of the fight against childhood obesity. They should do so without delay, the sooner to begin stemming an epidemic that threatens the state's future health and prosperity.

Senate Substitute Bill 210 and House Substitute Bill 373 would establish three responsibilities for schools:

- Any food served or sold in schools must meet nutritional standards.
- The school day should include adequate physical exercise beyond recess, and physical-education teachers should be certified in that field and adhere to state content standards for their courses. High-school health courses should teach about nutrition and physical activity.
- Schools must conduct weight screenings, educate parents about the results and report results to the Ohio Department of Health in order to measure overall progress in fighting childhood obesity.

Health experts long have known that rising obesity rates in America, especially among children, are a serious public-health threat. These companion bills, backed by the Ohio Business Roundtable and the Ohio Children's Hospital Association, aim to make ordinary families take notice, by making changes in daily routines in an area families can't ignore: school.

It's a smart and appropriate strategy, given the time kids spend in schools and the eating they do there, whether from school lunches, a la carte offerings or straight from the vending machine.

Some may object to assigning schools so much responsibility for children's health; indeed, how parents feed their children can be an intensely personal concern, and focusing on an individual child's weight can be touchy.

Some parents no doubt will be offended to hear from the school that their children are obese. But, as increasing evidence makes clear, obesity no longer is a matter only of personal appearance, but a serious health issue. For a qualified professional to bring it up to parents isn't rude or insensitive, any more than delivering the results of a tuberculosis screening or vision check.

Schools have protested a proposed requirement that all students have at least 30 minutes of exercise daily outside of recess, saying they don't have the time or money to provide it. It's a reasonable point, given all the other academic mandates that have been placed on schools in recent years.

A Senate committee last week bowed to those concerns by amending the bill to allow school districts to seek a waiver of the exercise requirement.

The Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease, a national organization of hundreds of health-care, government, education and business organizations, predicted last year that, within a decade, half of all Ohio children would be obese, an increase from 34 percent in 2008. Obesity in childhood is especially damaging: Children who are obese are four times as likely to develop diabetes and twice as likely to have asthma as are children of healthy weight. And the future isn't bright; a child who is obese at age 10 has an 80 percent chance of being overweight as an adult and thereby facing a higher risk of heart disease, stroke, cancer and high blood pressure.

The implications for health-care costs, not to mention Ohioans' productivity and quality of life, are clear.