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Weight of an epidemic

A new law to fight childhood obesity already requires strengthening

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Without question, Ohio's new law targeting childhood obesity takes some important new steps to help children develop healthy habits for the long term. For a start, the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children Act, which Gov. Ted Strickland signed last week, properly enlists schools in a necessary campaign to reverse obesity trends in Ohio.

The law creates a council to monitor progress in student health and make policy recommendations on best practices in improving nutrition standards, body weight and physical activity in schools. It requires a license to teach physical education and provide instruction in the benefits of physical activity and good nutrition as part of the health curriculum necessary for graduation. With other measures, these elements help in establishing a basic framework to develop a standard anti-obesity program statewide.

If the bipartisan drive to combat obesity was encouraging, the compromises it took to move the bill into law seriously weaken its potential for a broad impact. For instance, a proposal for a half-hour of physical activity daily, which is considered crucial in maintaining a healthy weight, survived — but only as a voluntary pilot program. School officials can argue financial hardship to avoid or delay implementing other provisions, including weight screenings.

The medical consensus is that obesity among adults and children is an epidemic. You don't fight an epidemic by sprinkling waivers into legislation. The governor recognizes the law must be revisited to "diminish the ability to have opt-out provisions as they currently exist." The sooner, the better.