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CNN SATURDAY MORNING NEWS

Kids and Obesity; No More "D" Grade

Aired August 14, 2010 - 09:00 ET

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T.J. HOLMES, CNN ANCHOR: Well, kids in one state not just taking their report cards home this school year. Many could also be taking a letter home to their parents that says, "Your kid is fat." Well, in a New Jersey school district making a D is no longer an option. You either make an A, a B, a C or you fail.

Hello there, everybody. I'm T.J. Holmes. And as we do every Saturday here on CNN SATURDAY MORNING, we dedicate this 9:00 Eastern half-hour to one hot topic that's been on people's minds this week.

And today we are talking about education. Kids are back to school this week in lots of places or they're getting ready to go back to school so it is on a lot of people's minds.

In Ohio, a new state law provides for students to be screened for their body mass index or BMI. They are trying to get a handle on childhood obesity there. In a moment I'll be talking live with an Ohio superintendent who wants to avoid screening his students.

Also, they're trying to raise the bar in one New Jersey school district by doing away with the D grade. Is this really the way to do it? The superintendent of that New Jersey district will be here to explain and also our education contributor Steve Perry will be along as well this half-hour to chime in on all things.

But let's start in Ohio, where earlier this summer, Governor Ted Strickland signed the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children bill. The legislation is meant to curb childhood obesity where according to the governor, one out of every three kids born in that state is obese by the age of eight.

The bill changes nutritional requirements with foods and drinks and schools and it allows schools to participate in a program that gets kids 30 minutes of rigorous exercise every day. It also provides for schools to screen students in kindergarten, third, fifth and ninth grades for their BMI, the body mass index. BMI can be an indicator of body fat and can be an indicator of potential health problems down the road.

Now, here's what some of the parents are saying about the screenings.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GRETCHEN LATTIMORE, PARENT: There's so much influence with causing eating disorders anyway that if kids know what this means for them, then it could cause them to go in that direction.

DUSTIN BISH, PARENT: It has its good points, it's bad points. All in all they're always looking out for your well beings.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOLMES: Now, before we go any further here, you may be asking BMI, exactly, what is it? Yes, it means body mass index but how do you calculate it in the first place. It's a tad complicated. But let's give you a little breakdown. This is how you do it. You're supposed to take your weight in pounds and multiply it by 703. Go ahead, get that shot for me there. There it is. So your weight. I just happen to use my weight here.

170 pounds multiplied that by 703. You see that big number. Then take your height in inches and multiply it by itself. I'm 5'11" so it's 71 inches by 71 inches. And then you take the first number and divide it by the second and your result, for me, is 23.7. All right. That's my body mass index.

So what does that exactly mean? Well take a look at the scale they have set up. If your body mass index is less than 18.5 you are considered underweight. Normal is between 18.5 and 24.9, where I fall. And overweight is considered 25 to 29.9. Anything over 30 is considered obese. That is how it breaks down.

Now, let's get back to this Ohio law aimed at lowering the number of obese children there. I'm joined now by Perrysburg superintendent Tom Hosler. He's joining us this morning, actually from Detroit, and also Cincinnati State Senator Eric Kearney joins me as well. He was a part of that legislation.

Gentlemen, both of you, thank you so much for being here and Senator Kearney, let me ask you first. What was kind of the idea in the first place behind this legislation in trying to get schools to screen children for BMI?

ERIC KEARNEY, OHIO STATE SENATE: Thank you and good morning. Well, a couple of things. One, I visited a school district, Elmwood place, and the kids there were suffering from obesity and the principal told me about a story how three kids in every section were obese and were suffering from diabetes and other heart conditions.

So that got me to investigate the issue further and got some colleagues like Senator Coughlin, Representative Kearney, Representative Watchman and we came up with this bill, Healthy Choices for Healthy Children.

HOLMES: How is it supposed to help though if you send the kid home with a note that says the BMI is this or that? You're just making people aware or you take the information and possibly try to do something with it. I guess how does it help?

KEARNEY: Well, that's not exactly how the bill works.

HOLMES: OK. KEARNEY: True enough, parents get the BMI index sent home, but the way the data is reported and - remember, kids are only tested third, fifth and ninth grade -- is that it's reported out by counties, not by school district and not by schools. So kids aren't ostracized for, let's say, "oh, that's the fat school or that's the school that has a weight problem."

HOLMES: Well, let me bring -

(CROSSTALK)

KEARNEY: What it does is, it helps the state evaluate trends.

HOLMES: All right. Mr. Hosler, I guess in some ways you weren't necessarily buying that. And there is a provision in there that allows some school districts to opt out. You're certainly trying to do that. So why do you not think this is a good idea? I mean why not give parents and educators and also state legislators an idea of just how serious the problem is?

TOM HOSLER, SUPERINTENDENT, PERRYSBURG SCHOOLS: Well, thank you. By the way, congratulations on your BMI. That's quite impressive.

HOLMES: Thank you.

HOSLER: You know, I think what the state's trying to achieve and first of all, you know, in Perrysburg and almost all districts, we're very concerned about childhood obesity. We understand that there's a major issue with these. We certainly applaud the senator and his colleagues for putting it on the national and state wide table for us to debate and talk about.

The attention is a good thing. As you look at the legislation, there's many good components that I think most people agree with, and that is, you know, we need to work together to find a solution for this.

However, when it comes to the implementation of this, that's where we begin to get a little bit nervous. You know, everything that I've read - and the senator's correct about the statistics. But everything I've read, really the health care providers, health care professionals are really the ones that are needed to help talk to the students who are getting these results and counsel the families in terms of what healthy choices they need to make, and in a time where funding is being reduced, we cut 50 percent of our elementary nurses this year because of reductions that we've received in our funding. We're just not comfortable with handling it ourselves.

HOLMES: Well, Mr. Hosler, it sounds like I'm hearing from you is that in fact it is not necessarily that you disagree with possibly screening kids from BMI, you just can't afford to implement it and do it.

HOSLER: Well, I think that's one piece of it and I know the state has allowed us to seek a waiver. If we had the ability to fund the program, I still think there's some concerns about it because I think it's really a place for health care providers and health care professionals.

Our mission is education. With the H1N1 vaccine for example this past fall, you know, we were very - we worked very closely with our health care professionals to help deliver the vaccines to help educate families and students about what they can do to be safe. But when it came down to implementing the shots, you know, the health care providers did that. I think that's probably what our role should be in this.

HOLMES: Well, Senator Kearney, I know you're trying to get back in there. Go ahead.

KEARNEY: Yes, well, a couple of things. One is, the cost isn't that great. And I completely respect the work that Tom has done. Perrysburg is a great school district. But the cost isn't that great but the consequences are. We've got severe obesity and overweight problems in our state. 33 percent of the children between the ages of 10 and 17, according to a study by Cincinnati Children's and Lisa Simpson are overweight or obese. And that has consequences later on.

The second point that I'd like to make is there are some innovative ideas that school districts are doing across the state of Ohio. For example, South Avondale (ph) School, Principal (INAUDIBLE) is working with the center for closing the health gap to teach physical education teachers to do a better job. Also Livingston Elementary in Columbus, Ohio has a videotape where the kids do exercises in the morning before school, and then the third school is Jackman (ph) Elementary where they've got zones of getting cardio rates up and negative behaviors down.

HOLMES: Mr. Hosler, I'll let you wrap it up here for me quickly if you can and kind of respond to that. He's saying, you know what the consequences are a lot greater than the cost could possibly be to you. So is it a way to try to figure out in getting it done? Because it sounds like to the senator there the consequences could be great.

HOSLER: Well, I think he's correct. I mean the consequences are great and we're concerned about all of our students and their well being. And you know, I think schools oftentimes are blamed - are the cause of many of life's problems and we're also the cure to many of life's problems. And I think we have a role in helping fight this. There's no question about it. And I think educators across the state are willing to take up that charge.

But I think there comes a point where we step back as a school district and allow the parents and the physicians and the health care providers to pick up the pace with, you know, carrying it to that next step. But the legislation I think points us in the right direction and we're excited to be a part of it but a little hesitant about the implementation.

HOLMES: Well, Superintendent Tom Hosler and again state Senator Eric Kearney, gentlemen, I appreciate you both being here and a part of this (INAUDIBLE) half hour we have here.

HOSLER: Thank you very much. HOLMES: And again, at least we're talking about it and that's an important thing as well. Gentlemen, enjoy the rest of your weekend.

KEARNEY: Keep that BMI down!

HOLMES: All right. Thank you.

HOSLER: Good luck.

HOLMES: Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you so much.

Well, coming up here, some students in New Jersey can guarantee - they can guarantee their parents they will not be making any "Ds" this school year. That's because a "D" is not an option. It's either an "A," a "B," a "C" or an "F." We'll ask the superintendent why they are going to this new grading scale.

Also, who is teaching our kids these days? Hopefully not the same person who's painting the school cross walk outside of the school. You notice anything a little off there? It's nine past the hour.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HOLMES: Welcome back. 12 minutes past the hour. Even if the federal government won't build a fence to protect the border, an Arizona school building one of its own to protect its own borders. Take a look here. This is the little red school house in Nogales. It sits on the Arizona-Mexico border. And the school has now put a seven-foot fence - there's a look at it, with barb wire at the top. The hope is to deter illegal immigrants who cross the U.S. border from coming on to school property.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GREGORY ZAPATA, CONCERNED STUDENT: A lot of people crossing over with drugs and we need it for safety - we need to be safe because they go to the school.

IRMA CARRILLO, CONCERNED PARENT: And our kids are always coming home, "mom, they got somebody else. Mom, they were chasing somebody."

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOLMES: Also, we know. I mean, anybody. A first-grader can spell the word school. Right? But apparently not the road crew in charge of painting this school zone. This is outside of a school in Greensboro, North Carolina. The road crew spelled the word school, s-h-c-o-o-l. Fortunately, it didn't take long before the road crew came back out and corrected the spelling mistake after consulting with some elementary school children.

Well, how much different would your academic career have been if you could not earn a "D" on anything. Not on a test, not an essay, not your homework, not a report card, no "Ds." Well, that's what students in one New Jersey school district are going to find out this year. Any grade below 70 and you flunk. That's an "F." Larry Reynolds is the superintendent of the Mount Olive School District where a "D" is no longer an option. Mr. Reynolds, good morning, sir. We appreciate you being here. Why no "Ds"?

LARRY REYNOLDS, SUPERINTENDENT, MOUNT OLIVE SCHOOL DISTRICT: Well, we have in our school district, our terrific system of schools with teachers and the board of education decided that we needed to raise the bar for our kids. We had hundreds of them each and every year at the end of the year earning a grade of "D" and they could simply do better. And we decided that we're not going to make that an option any longer because society simply doesn't accept the grade of that performance any longer.

HOLMES: Do you think you might see more kids flunking more classes and tests because, you can be right on that borderline, a 69, yes, that's still a "D" but not so bad of a "D." Do you feel you might have more failing kids?

REYNOLDS: No. I think in the long run, more of our kids will actually move to the standard of 70. And we see that all the time, for instance, when kids want to get a driver's license. The standard here in New Jersey is 80. On their 16th birthday they hurriedly run down and take a test over a 300-page book. They have no problem passing that test.

And by the way, if they do fail it, there are no excuses. It's not graded on the curve. They are basically pay their money again and take the test again because they want to do that. We need to provide the same level of motivation and resource to make that happen. And the Board of Education has provided a good number of additional resources and support just to make sure that our kids have the necessary tools to succeed.

HOLMES: What are your students telling you about this new system?

REYNOLDS: Well, it is still early and it is the summer and so many of them are gone. We did have a chance to talk to a few of them. And the reaction, frankly, is kind of mixed. Kids themselves actually if you talk to them, they know they're not trying their hardest.

As a matter of fact, this past year I ran into a bunch of kids who were sitting out front of the principal's office. And I said "Why are you here?" "Well, we're here for our grades." "Why?" "Well, I didn't do my homework." "Why not?" "Well, I didn't feel like it."

Well, you know, these are the kind of kids who are getting "Ds." They go home and tell their parents I'm trying my hardest, or they say to their parents "we don't have homework or we don't have tests." And mom and dad has no way of really finding out.

So one of the things we're doing is providing an automatic e-mail system so that any graded assignment with a score lower than 70 is going to automatically send an e-mail to mom and dad and then they're going to be able to get into the act hopefully helping kids focus their attention on getting over the standard, minimum standard of 70.

HOLMES: Well, Mr. Reynolds, do you fear as well - because kids have all kinds of challenges out there from home life to upbringing. You name it. But you fear sometimes that maybe a kid is giving all they can give and because of this new system now, instead of being able to pass, they are going to end up failing. I mean sometimes, yes, you want kids - and raise that standard. We all want that but you know, some kids just have a tougher time than others.

REYNOLDS: It really goes to the issue of what schools are all about. We prefer, the Board of Education prefers that our schools be about learning as opposed to scoring or even getting credit. And if given the option of giving someone a grade and sending them on to the next class not really knowing anything about the class they were just in or failing, I'd prefer that the students fail.

At least they have a chance to do it over or to get more help. Just giving a "D" however and saying, "well you know something, they're going to go out in life and the "D" airplane pilot, the "D" plumber, the "D" refrigerator repairman, I mean, do you really, do we have a place for these, to people like that.

Our kids really, really need to understand the subject matter that we're working with them for. Therefore we're taking it very seriously. We hope that they will as well.

HOLMES: Well, Mr. Reynolds, that's a great point. Nobody would want to be flying on a plane and the pilot was a "D" pilot and just barely got through his pilot's class. Nobody would want that. So very good point you made there. Mr. Reynolds, we appreciate you taking the time out. I'm glad you weren't my superintendent. I would have never made it through some my classes, my man. You enjoy the rest of your weekend, sir. Thanks so much.

REYNOLDS: Thank you.

HOLMES: Well, the president claims you do not have a "D" news anchor. By the way. Just kidding there. The president's claiming to have saved the jobs of more than 100,000 teachers with the stroke of a pen. We'll explain coming up.

Also, our education contributor, Steve Perry, my man. He is set to go at it on all things related to education with me this morning. It's 18 past the hour. We'll be right back after a quick break.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HOLMES: Well, 160,000 teachers will be able to keep teaching thanks to a bill signed by President Obama this week. The president signed his \$26 billion bill on Tuesday and it gives about \$16 billion to states to cover Medicaid costs but also \$10 billion to prevent layoffs of teachers and emergency first responders.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARACK OBAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: We do nothing, these educators won't be returning to the classroom this fall. And that won't just deprive them of a paycheck, it will deprive the children and parents who are counting on them to provide a decent education.

It means that students in Illinois and West Virginia who count on Rachel and Shannon are going to be not getting the education that they deserve.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOLMES: Well, helping to keep teachers in place. You just heard the president talk about that money there. And also you heard my conversation a moment ago with the superintendent where their school district is doing away with the grade of "D." We want to hit a couple of these topics and more with our education contributors, friend of our show, Dr. Steve Perry, here with us. Good to have you back with us, Steve. This has got to be a good idea. No "Ds."

STEVE PERRY, CNN EDUCATION CONTRIBUTOR: Well, it feels gimmicky. It feels like the removal of the "D" doesn't necessarily increase the student's performance. We have to ask the question what is the intent here. If the intent is to in fact - in fact - increase the expectations of children, who could argue with that?

The problem is that I haven't heard enough from the superintendent, Mr. Reynolds or even in any information I've read about what they're going to do to actually improve student performance. Also, referring to a student as a "D" student simply because they received a "D" in a class seems to me to be a bit of a stretch. If you get a "D" in calculus, are you really a "D" student? So, there's got to be more to the discussion than just the removal of "D."

HOLMES: But Steve, you said it sounds gimmicky? If it does nothing else, if they don't implement anything else in class and change the standards and maybe offer some tutoring, as long as you increase the standard and kids know now "I don't have an option but to make an "A," "B" or "C" or I'm going to fail, doesn't it do its job on its own, just to increase that motivation from the kids.

PERRY: No. What it does is it removes the "D." It sounds like a very politically moved decision. It doesn't feel to me, based upon what I heard, it doesn't feel to me to be educationally sound. There are a number of ways in which you can grade children. You don't have to give them letter grades, you can give them number grades. You can come out with a number of different strategies to grade the children.

It is not the grading system that matters, whether you use an inch or a centimeter to determine the length of something. It is what exactly you are measuring. If the teachers are the same teachers and Ruberts (ph) are the same Ruberts (ph) and the students are the same students, then what are you really changing?

There has to be something different, fundamentally different, in the way in which the teaching occurs. One step further. We also have to ask the question what supports are the children going to receive. One of the suggestions that was made by the school district was that they would do peer tutoring. OK. Not enough. An e-mail home. Not enough.

When you sit down with your child to help your child in algebra and you haven't taken it in 20 years, you're not going to be much help to your child. And so when your child doesn't do her or his homework, the question has to be why, not removing the "D." Let's find out what the reason is for the child's performance before we start making these types of decisions.

HOLMES: OK. But Steve, were you able to hear the superintendent on? I think you were -

(CROSSTALK)

PERRY: I did. I heard him.

HOLMES: But he explained himself in that it does - it's simply, we're not going to allow a child to be below average. And I asked that question about, you know, every kid has different things going on at home and whatnot, but why allow a kid to be below average? He even said I would prefer if the kid would just fail. Then we'll bring him back and we'll do it again but we're going to make sure they're not

below average.

PERRY: But the child is coming in to the school system. And the school system has to own the responsibility. They have to answer the question themselves. What are they going to remove from themselves? So then if it's going to be high stakes and the child is going to fail, then the teachers who give the "Ds" or would have given the "Fs" are they also going to suffer some sort of repercussions?

Because too often schools are designed essentially to only measure what the children do, not what the adults do. These children go to that school system and if they're about 400 children out of 1,500 who have received a "D," let's ask the question why, we as a school system are in the position where children are performing at "D" level.

It doesn't necessarily mean that the child has the capacity. Not every child is good at every subject. And not every child is going to be expected to study every subject for the rest of their life. We have to ask the bigger questions. The reason this feels gimmicky is because I don't also hear what the district is going to do to look inside themselves and see what they're not doing to teach these children to perform well and above average as Mr. Reynolds says.

HOLMES: OK. I got to go to a commercial break right now, Steve. But I'm going to call you after this and we're going to continue this conversation about this "D." Our Steve Perry, our education contribution.

I had another topic I wanted to get to but I was so fascinated to hear about you on this "D" topic. Steve, good to see you, as always, on the air but I'm going to call you, buddy. All right. We're going to go take a quick break. And "Your Bottom Line" with Stephanie Elam, the return. She's coming up after the break. Stay here.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

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