

# Policy Brief

**To: Senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand**

From: Steven Siegel

Date: January 22, 2019

**Re: What programs should be implemented to prevent childhood obesity?**

**Statement of Issue:** Over the past 3 decades childhood and adolescent obesity rates have tripled. Childhood obesity is the greatest risk factor for adult obesity. In 2017 a quarter of all adults and a third of all children in New York State were considered obese. Obesity is considered an epidemic in New York State and is the second leading cause of preventable death in the US.

- **Children receive about half of their daily caloric intake from school meals.** The School Nutrition Association (SNA) believes that school meals are just as important to learning as teachers and textbooks. Two out of every 3 children are low income and qualify for free or reduced price school meals for breakfast and lunch. Low-income children are excessively impacted by unhealthy meals and obesity.
- **The Food and Nutrition Service provides nutrition for 30 million students at 99,000 schools.** The USDA's new rules for the Food and Nutrition Service permit schools to reduce amount of fruits and vegetables in school meals. The rule allows starchy vegetables such as potatoes to replace fruits and also allow schools to increase sales of french fries, pizza, and hamburgers. This replaces balanced school meals with meals high in sodium and trans fats. These changes are lauded by the potato industry.
- **Obesity can greatly impact overall health.** Obesity can lead to premature death, disabilities, poor self-esteem and mental health, depression, diabetes type II, heart disease, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, stroke, cancers, asthma, and osteoarthritis. Experts estimate that by 2030 the cost of care for these obesity related conditions will reach \$48-66 billion annually. Evidence shows that healthy eating is associated with positive health outcomes.

## Policy Options:

- Federal mandate calling for stricter nutritional standards for school lunches. Stricter standards would include balanced meals as per 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines. Schools that do not meet standards will be subject to fine or have funding restricted
  - o Advantages-Federal mandate assures that standards apply to all schools, regardless of state they are located in. Gives states and school districts some flexibility to develop their own standards as long as they meet the Dietary Guidelines. Gives all children at school access to healthy, balanced meals regardless of family income. Reduces consumption of sodium and trans fats during school meals, increases consumption of fruits and vegetables. Schools have financial incentive to follow stricter guidelines.

- Disadvantages-Stricter nutritional standards are associated with increased cost. Schools that are already underfunded in low-income areas may not be able to afford more nutritional food options. Subjecting these already underfunded schools to fines and further funding restrictions could potentially exacerbate the issue.
- Statewide mandate applying nutritional standards for low-income students who are receiving school meals for free or at reduced price.
  - Advantages-Nutritional equity for low-income students, currently 15% of households have inadequate food and nutrition due to insufficient income. Supports student population that is at greatest risk of developing obesity and associated illnesses. This population is less likely to meet nutritional standards from meals at home and often receive the majority of their meals at school.
  - Disadvantages-Does not change nutritional standards for students that are not considered low-income. Can lead to disparities in nutrition status. Can open the door to bullying and mistreatment of students receiving different quality meals.
- Federal mandate to implement health education at all schools in the US. Health education would include healthy eating habits and physical activity.
  - Advantages-Educate children about benefits of healthy lifestyle, healthy eating, and exercise. Educate about risks of obesity, poor diet, and sedentary lifestyle. Help children to develop healthy eating patterns that they can follow throughout their lives. Mandatory physical education and periods of activity to avoid sedentary habits. Help children to develop healthy exercise habits that they can follow throughout their lives. Health education can lead to healthy eating patterns at school and at home and can prevent onset of obesity and diseases associated with obesity.
  - Disadvantages-Cost associated with educating the educators so that they can pass on the knowledge to their students. Educating about healthy eating and allowing for physical activity takes time out of an already busy school day.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

Childhood obesity rates are climbing, leading to increase in adults with obesity and associated illnesses. Federal reform is essential in combating this epidemic. Federal mandates requiring schools to have (a) stricter nutritional guidelines and (b) health education can help to reduce rates of obesity. Stricter guidelines and changes to education curriculum may cost money and time, however the costs associated with obesity and its related illnesses is greater. Helping children to eat more balanced, nutritional meals and to develop healthier diet/exercise habits will help them to avoid obesity as adults. As a society we must help children to avoid obesity, it will benefit their health today and it will save money in the long term by avoiding billions of dollars in health care costs associated with obesity.

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