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HEALTHY CHOICES FOR HEALTHY CHILDREN COALITION

Bills take obesity fight into Ohio schools

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BY [JIM SIEGEL](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ohio's children are fat and getting fatter.

The problem has reached such alarming proportions that a new, powerful coalition of businesses and health-care advocates is pushing for statewide standards designed to make Ohio students healthier.

A study by the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease found that Ohio's obesity rates could eclipse 50 percent by 2018, with associated health-care costs surpassing \$16 billion that year.

"The epidemic of childhood obesity exceeds what any of us thought we would see," said Dr. Steve Allen, CEO of Nationwide Children's Hospital, a key member of the new Healthy Choices for Healthy Children coalition.

In the past 20 years, the number of heavy children ages 6 to 11 has doubled, and the number of overweight teenagers has tripled, Allen said. "It's become a problem that just has grown unabated, and it imposes significant societal problems."

The Healthy Children coalition is backing a bipartisan bill that aims to get children more active and expose them less often to unhealthy lunches and snacks. The bill, introduced in both the Ohio House and Senate, would:

- Require that schools provide 30 minutes of physical activity for students each day.
- Increase required physical-education time for high-school students from a half-unit to a full unit, and ensure that teachers are licensed in physical education.

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- Require that schools offer more nutritious food and beverages in vending machines and on a la carte menus.

- Require body-mass-index screenings for students entering third, fifth and ninth grades, educate parents about the results, and post aggregate results on district report cards.

- Increase access to free breakfast for students who qualify.

"I'm not a big-government kind of guy," said Sen. Kevin Coughlin, R-Cuyahoga Falls, a sponsor of the bill. "But during the seven hours or so a day that our schools have our children, we can at least be doing the right things and sending the right signals."

Another sponsor, Rep. John Patrick Carney, D-Columbus, called obesity "the biggest preventable health crisis facing Americans today."

"In a lot of our schools, we're feeding kids pizza, hamburgers and french fries, and we've dwindled down physical activity to the point where we're pretty much last in America," he said.

Lawmakers spoke during a morning news conference at Livingston Elementary School in Columbus, where they also watched students follow a 10-minute workout video created by Principal Melinda Dixon. She said students also can participate in an after-school Fitness And Nutrition Club.

Later, Dr. Leona Cuttler of Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland told the Senate Health Committee that a 2008 study of 50,000 adults and 6,000 children in Ohio found that one in three children and two in three adults are overweight or obese. The data suggest that obesity rates are rising, with Ohio ranked the 15th-fattest state for kids and 10th for adults.

Children who are obese after age 6 are 10 to 20 times more likely to be obese adults, she said.

"Obesity in Ohio is now so great and so pervasive a problem that we need comprehensive policy change," Cuttler said in advocating for the bill.

The Ohio Business Roundtable also made a rare committee appearance to testify in favor of the bill. In a study of Ohio's health-care system earlier this year, the group found that childhood obesity is the most profound long-term public-health issue confronting the state.

The obesity epidemic "screams out for action," said Richard Stoff, president of the roundtable.

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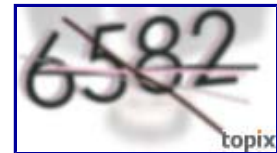
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