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## We must get past our fear of teaching health

By Krista Ramsey

*"No knowledge is more crucial than knowledge about health. Without it, no other life goal can be successfully achieved."*

- *The Carnegie Foundation Report on Secondary Education in America*

A wise little quote - except, of course, in Ohio. Here, health education is surrounded by a deep moat of silence.

A nasty fight over sex education in the 1990s left Ohio policymakers and education leaders so bruised they simply retreated from the topic of health education. Ohio children have suffered ever since.

If you live in Hawaii, Kentucky, Massachusetts, North Carolina - most other states - you can hop onto your department of education Web site and see what students are expected to learn about health. Not so in Ohio. Content standards for health education don't exist.

School districts know better than to rock the boat on this issue, and politicians avoid it like H1N1. But now new legislation requiring schools to address childhood obesity is picking up steam, and it's time to ask the question again - why is Ohio ignoring health education?

Senate Bill 210 lays out in painstaking detail what can and cannot be served in school cafeterias and offered in vending machines - "12 ounces or less of 100 percent fruit juice, or a 100 percent fruit juice and water blend with no added sweeteners, that contains not more than 160 calories per eight ounces."

It is all over physical education requirements, mandating 30 minutes of daily physical activity, doubling the P.E. requirement for high school students and requiring districts to add P.E. performance to their local report card.

But when it comes to the health curriculum, it has virtually nothing to say.

Dealing with the H1N1 pandemic should have raised alarms about how little young Ohioans know about their own health. For all the scurrying around teaching children to sneeze into their elbows and wash their hands, the truth is most kids have a weak foundation to hang their habits on. An immune system - what's that?

With health such a hot-potato topic, schools focused their attention elsewhere. The solar system is safe; so is tornadic activity, igneous rock and probably even greenhouse gases.

But the care and construction of the human body doesn't come up much. In fact, educators say words such as *body* and *lifestyle choices* are buzzwords that set off alarms. Start talking about this body business, and sooner or later somebody's going to mention s-e-x.

So to spare adults that controversy, Ohio schoolchildren have been shortchanged on information

about nutrition, contagious disease, basic anatomy, mental health and responsible habits.

And we wonder why they can't see that Blazing Hot Cheetos and a Mountain Dew are not a reasonable lunch.

The sponsors of S.B. 210 deserve credit for pulling schools into the fight against childhood obesity, although where schools will find the money or time to add BMI screenings or 30 minutes of daily activity is a serious question.

But whether the issue is weight or whooping cough, children deserve to study human health with the same calm and consistency that they study grammar or geography.

States not held captive by petty politics have gotten that all along. And the Centers for Disease Control lists health education as the very first component of a coordinated school health program.

In the end, if we want to raise fit kids, we have to raise kids fit to make wise choices about their own health.

## Additional Facts

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