

INTRODUCTION

The Epidemic of Childhood Overweight and Obesity

Few problems in the arena of public health are as alarming as the rate at which our population, both adults and children, is becoming overweight, and even obese. Although as health professionals we focus primarily on the health consequences of these trends, as we think about possible interventions to stem the tide of increasing body weight and physical inactivity in our society, we quickly realize that these are “health issues” which will require multi-sectoral response. At the same time that we may blame our public schools for their eagerness to open their facilities to the advertising and sale of unhealthy soft drinks and snacks—not to mention the bombardment of students with product advertising in exchange for the installation of computers and other equipment—we have to recognize that it is the schools where we might find our most salient influence on the dietary and lifestyle decisions of our youth.

The proposal for having our schools reinvigorate their programs in relation to health and physical activity for all students is a controversial matter, especially when such proposals are made as “unfunded mandates” that put additional burdens on already stressed local school systems and personnel. The Chairman of the State Board of Education has made known his personal opposition to a state mandate for such programs given the demands of other curricular components and other demands on local school system budgets. In his words, such a mandate would be “fiscally irresponsible in today’s budgetary crisis.”

If our state is to address the problem of obesity in our overall population, we have to start by addressing these issues among our children and youth. In this issue of the *Journal*, we are provided an extensive “issue brief” prepared by Meg Molloy, Kristen Kovach, Phil Bors, Dorothy Caldwell, and Janice Sommers Lebeuf, a group of authors well known for their individual and collective efforts in childhood overweight prevention and education.

Following the issue brief is an interesting perspective on these issues by Charles Willson, the President of the North Carolina Pediatric Society. The Acting State Health Director, Leah Devlin, proposes a statewide effort to address the problem in her “Call to Action.” Robert Schwartz, a pediatric endocrinologist at Wake Forest School of Medicine, offers additional insight into the social environment within which our children are making daily food and snack choices. Kristie Weisner, an exercise physiologist from the NC Institute of Medicine, reviews the current status of physical activity and education in our NC public schools. And two members of the North Carolina General Assembly who have worked to facilitate legislative approaches to these issues discuss their own concerns about the decisions of local school boards to invite soft drink companies into these facilities.

As always, we invite the comments and reactions of our readers on these and previous issues discussed in these pages. Through an active Letters-to-the-Editor section of the *Journal* we hope to keep the discussion of these topics moving, hopefully in the direction of a healthier and more health-conscious population for our state.

—Gordon H. DeFries, PhD
Editor-in-Chief and Publisher