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Using School Wellness Plans to Help Fight Childhood Obesity

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Trust for America's Health (TFAH), a national non-profit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority, is pleased to provide the Subcommittee with our views on utilizing school wellness plans to help fight childhood obesity.

We, at TFAH, believe that the childhood obesity epidemic is a critical issue in need of immediate attention. In the U.S., obesity rates have doubled and tripled in children and adolescents, respectively, over the last 20 years. The health consequences of overweight and obesity, which include increased rates of chronic diseases like Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke, are too serious to ignore. Some have predicted that the current generation could become the first generation in U.S. history with a shorter lifespan than their parents.

In our most recent report on obesity, *F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies are Failing in America 2006*, TFAH conducted a survey of state Chronic Disease Directors (CDDs) to determine which obesity prevention strategies experts believe are most effective. The CDDs ranked "school-based approaches, such as increasing physical education classes, more free recess/play time, or improving the nutritional content of foods sold in schools" as a top priority in combating childhood obesity.

Unfortunately, despite the alarming health effects of obesity, a range of research shows a decline in physical activity as children enter adolescence. A 2006 report from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that as many as 4.3 million U.S. elementary school students in up to 8,500 schools nationwide do not have recess. At the same time, many children do not eat nutritious meals. In fact, children under the age of 18 generally consume 50 percent or less of the recommended daily levels of fruits and vegetables. Comprehensive school health programs can help reverse both of these trends by giving children the opportunity to increase their physical activity levels, as well as the chance to eat fresh fruits and vegetables while in school. We are pleased that the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 required school districts with federally-funded school meal reimbursement programs to develop and implement wellness policies by the start of the 2006-2007 school year. We also are supportive of the recommended model school wellness policies that the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity and a variety of partner groups developed to guide schools.

Some schools and states are already making strides in the right direction. Hundreds of schools in at least 10 states are using the video game *Dance Dance Revolution* as a regular part of their physical education curriculum. The game requires students to dance in sync to music and offers them an innovative way to increase physical activity. In addition, forty Massachusetts communities have begun "walking school buses" with the help of parent volunteers, and some schools have started walking clubs. In addition, recently New York Governor Eliot Spitzer announced a proposal to improve nutrition and fitness in the state's public schools. It would require schools to ban soda, would place restrictions on the foods that could be sold in schools, and would mandate up to 30 minutes of recess for students in eighth grade and lower on days without a physical education class.

Our 2006 obesity report recommends a few general strategies that schools can pursue to reduce obesity among students. The report recommends that schools adopt higher nutritional standards than the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently requires for all food sold in schools, including competitive foods, and we are pleased that the USDA is supporting school efforts to comply with the 2005 dietary guidelines for the school lunch program. In addition, we recommend that schools revise food contract policies in order to focus on providing maximum nutritional standards to students. Finally, we encourage schools to evaluate and refine their Body Mass Index (BMI) screening programs and find ways to effectively use the data to inform obesity prevention and control efforts.

We believe that the federal government can also do more to boost school and state obesity mitigation efforts. The school health grant programs funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Division of Adolescent School Health assist states in improving the health of children by improving the quality and coordination of the school-level program that involves health and physical education, school meals, health services, healthy school environments, and staff health promotion, all of which work with students' families and other members of the community. Currently, school health programs are funded in just 23 states. Increasing funding for this important grant program would help expand this program to the other 27 states and the District of Columbia.

Finally, TFAH supports a number of bills that would address the obesity epidemic in schools.

- The Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act of 2007 (S.771/H.R. 1363) would direct the Secretary of Agriculture to update nutritional standards for foods sold in schools, and then apply the updated definitions everywhere on school grounds and throughout the school day.
- The Strengthening Physical Education Act of 2007 (H.R. 1224) would make physical education part of No Child Left Behind's core curriculum.
- The Nutrition Title of the Eat Healthy America Act (H.R. 1600) would expand the fresh fruit and vegetable program to serve students in more schools and instruct the Secretary to ensure that allocations of food and food ingredients offered in school nutrition programs are based on the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- The Healthy Students Act of 2007 (S.100) requires the CDC to establish a Commission to Improve School Meals tasked with developing new nutritional standards for the School Lunch, Summer Food Service, Child and Adult Care Food, and School Breakfast programs, and directs the Secretary of Education to award competitive grants to schools for Healthy Hour pilot programs which increase each school day by an hour that is exclusively devoted to physical activity.

Schools can and should play a large role in helping to reverse the obesity epidemic. The health of America's children is at risk, and it is incumbent upon all sectors of society, including government, to address the obesity crisis. Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on this urgent issue.