Schools Must Foster Exercise and Nutrition

Should Junk Food Be Sold in Schools?, 2011

Amy Klobuchar, the senior U.S. senator from Minnesota, was the first female elected to the Senate from that state. She serves on the Senate's Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.

Good nutrition and physical activity go hand in hand. Although school nutrition programs are incredibly important, encouraging healthy levels of physical activity both during the school day and outside school also is an important goal. We need to provide children with greater access to physical education courses and recess, as well as walkable routes to school and readily available recreation facilities. Of course, nutritious food also is important, which is why the secretary of Agriculture should have oversight over all food sold on school grounds, not just the food served as part of the federal school lunch program.

As the mother of a 14-year-old, I've seen the inside of a school lunch room more than a few times, and I know firsthand that one of the biggest challenges parents face is making sure their children are eating right and staying active.

It's an uphill battle to help our kids learn to make good food decisions—particularly when they are too often presented with an a la carte lunch room choice of french fries or yogurt. Given this reality, it's no wonder that childhood obesity has grown dramatically in recent decades—more than doubling in the past 20 years.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one out of every three children in the United States between the age of 2 and 19 is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. And nearly a quarter of all children between age 2 and 5 are either obese or overweight.

In addition to damaging our kids' health, obesity also hurts our economy. According to a Pediatrics medical journal study, the hospital cost of treating children for obesity-related conditions rose from $35 million during the years 1979 to 1981 to $127 million from 1997 to 1999.

People don't become obese overnight. Allowing our children to have treats in moderation—as in trick-or-treating—is one thing, but good nutrition involves discipline that must be learned and practiced on a daily basis.

Getting Schools Involved

So what can we do to get our kids to eat healthy foods? We need to first ensure kids have access to healthy foods. And schools play a critical role.

Currently, children consume 30 to 50 percent of their calories in school, making schools a make-or-break partner in the effort to improve the quality of our kids’ diets.

By law, federally subsidized school meals are required to meet nutrition standards and comply with the
Dietary Guidelines for Americans. However, food and beverages that aren't part of federal school meal programs are largely exempt from such requirements. This is especially concerning since only three out of 10 schools prohibit the sale of junk foods in school vending machines nationwide.

To address this issue, I sponsored the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act, which grants the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to regulate the sale of all foods and beverages on school grounds and requires national nutrition standards for these foods. Of course there will be an exemption for bake sales!

**Two Halves of the Equation**

Good nutrition is half of the equation. Exercise is the other half.

When I was a kid, school recess and physical education class were times for kids to run around and play games. These days, recess time is getting shorter and shorter and kids' waistlines are getting wider and wider.

The consequences of poor nutrition and a lack of exercise are serious. Obese children are more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and hypertension. Obesity also has an adverse impact on a child's academic and social performances. These consequences often last a lifetime since obese youth are statistically more likely to remain so through adulthood.

We also need to focus on prevention and provide kids with access to safe places to exercise and play. That starts in our neighborhoods. Studies show that people living in more walkable communities have a reduced risk of obesity, and children with easy access to recreational facilities are more active than those children with limited access.

Putting our children on the right path of good nutrition and exercise is a daily choice. It's not an easy task, but making changes in our schools and neighborhoods are essential steps to help improve the well-being of our kids and the long-term prosperity of our country.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


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