

Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy

2005 Legislative Agenda for Children and Youth

Background Information

Promoting Good Health and Nutrition

Issue #9:

In the United States, obesity has risen at an epidemic rate during the past 20 years. Researchers predict that obesity will soon surpass tobacco use as the number one contributor to chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. Oklahoma data shows the same trend as the US. It is estimated that 1.5 million Oklahoma adults are overweight, and of those, 500,000 are obese and at risk for illness. Treatment of obesity in adults is notoriously frustrating for patients and physicians alike, and it rarely meets with long-term success. Thus, prevention is the best hope for decreasing the prevalence of this condition.

Yet since the 1970s, the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for young children, and tripled for older children. It is estimated that over 9 million children over the age of 6 in the US are obese. The causes seem simple – too much TV and junk food. But the underlying factors are complex – safety factors that keep kids from walking to school, time pressures on families that send them to fast food chains, the rise of sedentary leisure time activities such as video games, and access to vending machines and a la carte lines at schools that sell unhealthful fare.

There is no single solution to the problem. In 2004, the Oklahoma Legislature passed the *Healthy and Fit Schools Act*, requiring schools to establish a health advisory committee made up of parents, school personnel, health care professionals and community leaders, to assess the local campus environment and make recommendations to the principal. Several school districts have already voted to exchange unhealthy items in their vending machines with healthier choices, and are adding opportunities for more physical activity.

However, not all elementary schools offer the recommended level of health and physical education. Some have even eliminated recess, and added an alternative cafeteria line that sells foods that have low nutritional value, such as hamburgers, french fries and sodas.

We owe it to our kids to provide an environment that is conducive to learning positive health habits, and that provides opportunities for regular physical activity and good nutrition.

Recommendation:

The Children's Agenda supports requiring physical education and health education in grades K-5-according to the State Department of Education "Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) Standards.