

Reducing Childhood Obesity: Public-Private Partnerships to Improve Nutrition and Increase Physical Activity in Children

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William Potts-Datema, M.S.

Action for Healthy Kids, Director, Partnerships for Children's Health at Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts

Chair

Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Good morning. I am William Potts-Datema, director of Partnerships for Children's Health at the Harvard School of Public Health. I am here today in my role as chairman of Action for Healthy Kids, the only combined national-grassroots effort to address the crisis of childhood overweight in America by focusing on changes in the school environment.

The landmark 2001 Surgeon General's report on overweight and obesity detailed the devastating and growing societal consequences of the epidemic in our country. The report included a "Call to Action" which identified schools as a critical environment that needed immediate attention.

Schools are in a unique position to help prevent and decrease childhood overweight. In schools, children spend a significant portion of their waking hours, at least 1250 hours each year. In schools, children learn significant and lasting lessons about nutrition and physical activity, both from the curriculum and from the examples of their teachers and peers. Schools provide all children equal access to information about nutrition and physical activity – regardless of their family's background, socio-economic status or prior knowledge of these issues. The influence of schools cannot be overstated.

In response to the Surgeon General's "Call to Action," the nation's leading health, nutrition, education and physical activity organizations convened to determine steps that could be taken within the school environment to address this crisis. These leaders, representing more than 35 national organizations and government agencies, agreed that meaningful change would require a public-private partnership of the broadest scope, and they adopted the goals outlined in the "Call to Action" as the focal point of their work.

The initiative began with

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the Healthy Schools Summit, held here in Washington, DC two years ago on October 7, 2002. Chaired by Former Surgeon General David Satcher with Mrs. Laura Bush serving as Honorary Chair, and with the participation of a number of other esteemed individuals -

- including the distinguished Majority Leader -- the Summit brought together a standing-room-only crowd of more than 500 dedicated individuals from every state in our union. These participants were clear and united in their call for a multi-disciplinary public-private initiative with support and guidance at the national level, but with the “real” action taking place at the grassroots level within our schools.

And so, Action for Healthy Kids was born. In less than two years’ time, we have created an infrastructure that combines national support with guidance and expertise from more than 40 national organizations and government agencies. The 51 AFHK State Teams have become centers for creative action within their states, building momentum towards positive changes within the school environment. Each AFHK State Team is a free-standing, diverse collaboration of volunteers from the private, public and non-profit sectors. All State Teams have chosen priorities developed from the “Call to Action” based on their evaluations of state needs and factoring the current status of local school environments. From there, State Teams have developed goals and action plans to address their specific priorities. Using systems coordinated through our national office, these teams regularly share timely information, success stories and best practices across the network. As we speak, State Teams are working in every state to improve children’s eating habits, increase their physical activity, and educate them about the supportive role of sound nutrition and physical activity in academic achievement.

For example, Tennessee AFHK State Team is a coalition that includes members from higher education, government, health professionals, educators and industry leaders. Middle Tennessee State University donates meeting space, office supplies, and students to help the team accomplish its goals. The team is working to increase healthy vending practices throughout in all schools. Recently, the Tennessee Department of Agriculture awarded an Agricultural Development Fund Grant to the team to administer a milk vending machine grant program in Tennessee public schools.

The NH AFHK team has been working with NH Department of Education to develop “best practices” recommendations for physical education and physical activity, which will then be disseminated to all schools. While the MA AFHK team collaborated with the MA Department of Education and MA School Food Service Association to develop and disseminate nutrition guidelines for a la carte foods and beverages to all 1,893 MA school districts, having the potential to positively impact nearly 1,000,000 students.

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Another example comes from Texas, where AFHK has provided training for 22 regional health specialists that are working to establish Coordinated School Health councils throughout the state in response to a legislative mandate. These specialists are helping to assess school districts’ needs, coordinate professional development, locate available resources and promote collaboration between schools, health agencies, and the community. Improving nutrition and physical activity are core activities for the Coordinated School Health councils.

There are, of course, many more examples of how state AFHK partnerships are taking action to help improve nutrition and physical activity and we encourage you to visit our web site at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org. Nationally, we have in-kind support from more than 40 organizations and government agencies. We receive funding from diverse sources, including the National Football League, the National Dairy Council and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and we estimate that the initiative receives approximately \$1.5 million annually in the form of in-kind services and contributions from our 4000+ volunteers.

I speak for myself, for my Board of Directors, for the 40-plus Partner Steering Committee organizations, and for the 51 state teams in applauding this Committee's attention to this important and timely issue. We place the childhood overweight epidemic at the top of our nation's healthcare agenda, and, beyond that, we believe it is clear that healthy children perform better in school. We are confident that, as Dr. David Satcher said at the Healthy Schools Summit, "There is no limit to what we can do if we work together." We look forward to working closely with you and others to continue to develop and nurture alliances and partnerships that make a real difference in the health of our nation's youth.

Thank you.