

Letters to the Editor

Overweight and Obesity Epidemic in NC

To the Editor:

I have read your November/December issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* with considerable interest. It is well written, timely, and thought-provoking. Every school board member, superintendent, and school principal (preschool through high school) in North Carolina should get a summary of the whole issue by email and/or on paper. The summary could be two or three pages of interesting information, attractively presented so they will actually read it. It should include realistic steps that school systems can take: (1) modifying food and drink available for healthful lunches and snacks at school, (2) removing enticing in-school ads and incentives that encourage poor nutrition, (3) increasing physical activity and improving physical education, (4) how and where to get more detailed information, and (5) educating parents, students, and school personnel about all of the above, plus the basic health and nutrition issues involved that they can use at home, especially with younger children. Some school systems might want to copy and distribute the summaries to parents and students.

Congratulations on presenting such a provocative and pertinent topic.

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To the Editor:

It was of great interest to me that the November/December issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* was devoted to the topic of the epidemic of childhood overweight and obesity. I am the principal of a middle school. My staff and I have observed this alarming trend of increased obesity in our children in recent years. That along with our concerns about sugar and caffeine and the effect they have on learning, especially in those children with attention or learning difficulties, led us to reduce the opportunities for our students to purchase candy and soft drinks, at least while they are in school.

Three years ago, our teachers used the sale of candy and soft drinks to finance field trips, rewards, incentives, and other activities that are an important part of our children's

overall educational experience. Drinks and candy were sold directly by the teachers at a break time, and we also had three drink machines available for general use. We reached a point where the overall nuisance of selling, collecting money, and cleaning up messes, along with the greater concerns about health and learning issues, caused us to cease the sale of candy and soft drinks to our students. The teachers stopped selling during break times at the beginning of last school year, and we removed the soft drink machines about one year ago.

Of course we still need to raise money to support our school! Unfortunately, there is never adequate funding for the public schools to do all that is needed to educate our children. Our teachers have found alternate methods such as coupon books, T-shirt sales, and discount cards to be successful fundraisers. At first the students were curious about why the drink machines were gone, but after we explained our concerns, they seemed to understand and there was very little complaining!

As you are probably aware, the North Carolina School Nutrition Committee, consisting of members from the Department for Public Instruction, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, issued a report to all the schools entitled, "Soft Drinks and School-Age Children: Trends, Effects, Solutions." That report encourages schools to promote water as the thirst quencher of choice for students. We have installed vending machines that provide bottled water and we are working with Dr. Benjamin Matthews of DPI to provide our students with individual water bottles to use during the day. We are also aware of the latest research on the brain and learning which points to the fact that in order for it to work at its optimum the brain must be well hydrated.

It certainly seems in the best interest of our children that we encourage all the suggestions made in the above-mentioned report. We need to encourage students to make healthier choices. I encourage my colleagues to investigate other ways to raise funds without selling drinks and candies to students. We have tried it and hopefully our students will benefit from our efforts.

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