Editorial

Back to the Basics: Eat Right and Get Active

Deborah J. Rhea

For 20 years, obesity rates have been climbing to their currently alarming levels. At first, we warned of adult health issues and the need to lose weight. Now we are calling the weight problem a pandemic, and it is affecting children as much or more than adults. Over those years, we have seen the prevalence of obesity increase from 5 to 12 percent in two- to five-year-old children, from 6.5 to 17 percent in six- to 11-year-olds, and from 5 to 18 percent in 12- to 19-year-olds in the United States (Ogden, Carroll, & Flegal, 2008; Ogden et al., 2006). Males ages six to 19 years have continued to increase their weight levels above already historic highs (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, Lamb, & Flegal, 2010). Black children had a 51 percent higher prevalence of obesity, and Hispanic children had a 21 percent higher obesity prevalence, compared to white children. Greater obesity rates for both black and white children were found in the South and Midwest United States than in the West and Northeast. Hispanics in the Northeast had lower obesity rates than Hispanics in the Midwest, South or West (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009; Ogden et al., 2006).

National and state health, physical education, recreation, and dance professionals; the CDC; American Heart Association; and many other associations have been talking for at least 10 years about the growing obesity problem and the lack of physical activity during the school day. However, they have run into many roadblocks from school administrators and state officials, who have reduced health and physical education class time or taken the courses out of the curriculum completely. Obviously the right people have not spoken until now.

In the past year, three key voices have spoken to draw attention to the importance of making drastic changes for children if we want them to outlive their parents. One is the United States Army. According to Defense Department figures, over the past four years 47,447 potential recruits flunked induction physicals because they were overweight (Miles, 2009). That is a fraction of the 205,902 such exams given in 2005 and 250,764 in 2008, but it is still a significant number. Other physically demanding jobs, including firefighters and the police forces, have expressed similar concern about applicants' fitness. Deputy Chief Ed Nied, chair of the safety, health, and survival section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, said that fire departments are also making a "major push" to encourage better fitness among young people who want to join (Schafer, 2009). Nied stated that poor fitness comes from a lack of physical education in the high schools.

A second voice is the National Football League (NFL). They have started a major push to change the way our nation thinks about sedentary lifestyles and the high obesity rates among children and youths (Keep Gym in School, 2009). They advocate for keeping physical education in the schools through their campaign, *Keep Gym in School*. As part of the league's NFL PLAY 60 youth health and fitness campaign, *Keep Gym in School* is NFL Network's comprehensive national program to boost fitness and physical education in America's middle schools. "It's more important than ever to give every student the opportunity to participate in quality physical education," said Dena Kaplan, senior vice president of marketing for NFL Network. "NFL Network is dedicated to the long-term success of physical education. That's why we are expanding the reach of our successful *Keep Gym in School* program to help more kids have access to physical activity in school." In the 2009-2010 school-year, NFL Network is expanding its reach and will work directly with more than 150 schools across the country—more than double the number of schools it served in the inaugural year of the program—through school adoptions, grants, and fitness programs. In partnership with the New York Giants, Baltimore Ravens, New England Patriots, and Chicago Bears, *Keep Gym in School* will refurbish physical education programs and host NFL minicamps at four middle schools. In addition, NFL Network is inviting the public to nominate their local middle schools for one of ten $1,000 *Keep Gym in School* grants (at www.keepgyminschool.com) and is engaging middle school students from across the country in the NFL Network In-School Fitness Program.

The third voice is First Lady Michelle Obama. She has acknowledged that obesity is an epidemic and one of the greatest threats to America's health and economy. She announced on January 20, 2010, at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, that she would launch a major initiative in February to combat the problem of childhood obesity (Helmich, 2010). Its purpose, she said, was "to put in place common-sense initiatives and solutions that empower families and communities to make healthy decisions for their kids."

This effort would have the federal government work with local officials and business and nonprofit leaders to provide more nutritious food in schools, to increase the physical activity opportunities for kids, and to expand communities' access to food that is healthful and affordable. She said, "We don't need to wait for some new invention or discovery to make this happen. This doesn't require fancy tools or technologies. We have everything we need right now—we have the information, we have the ideas, and we have the desire to start solving America's childhood obesity problem. The only question is whether we have the will."

These three voices are beginning to wake up America. The obesity problem did not happen overnight and will not change overnight, but having the backing of the White House, the NFL, and the armed forces definitely helps. All three have mentioned two very simple principles: eat right and get active. Two of the three have also voiced the importance of physical education in schools. Now is the time for health, physical education, recreation, and dance specialists to get on the bandwagon with these three voices to make a difference in schools. Many programs have developed out of a desire to take advantage of the money that can be made from the obesity epidemic (e.g., boot camps, fitness camps, weight-loss camps). Many of these camps are designed to get kids in shape in a six- to 10-week period, but they are short-term fixes, just like diets. Short-term camps will not work in the long term. It takes at least six months of continual practice to create a behavior change (Prochaska, Johnson, & Lee, 2009). Physical education programs offered daily at school as year-long courses will be much more effective than boot camps, weight loss camps, or fitness camps if we do the following: (1) teach nutrition

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and healthy eating habits regularly (2-3 days per week in the physical activities introduced in the physical education classes); (2) teach why it is important to be physically active now, not 20 years from now; (3) introduce a variety of physical activities so that children can decide what activities they can be more successful in and enjoy more because of their own interests and skills; and (4) continuously impress on the children how important regular physical activity is for brain power and physical power.

In conclusion, behavior change requires a change in one's environment, a change in one's thought patterns, and a goal to better oneself. My hope is that through the new voices of influence mentioned in this article and our powerful venues in the schools (health, physical education, recreation, and dance classes), we can begin to chip away at the obesity glacier by changing the way people think about and act toward eating right and getting physically active. I really do not want to see this generation of children die before their parents, but if they do not get the message soon, the fact is this will be the first generation of children to do so. As Michelle Obama said, "Do we have the 'will' to change behaviors?" I am throwing down the gauntlet for us as one of the largest physical activity and health organizations in the nation to do the following: come together as a task force and create a plan for pressuring schools across the nation to put daily, structured, physical education classes back in the schools for all K-12 students. Illinois, for example, is doing a great job with requiring physical education for all grade levels. Let us get a plan in place to push for a physical education initiative across the country.

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— Deborah J. Rhea (d.rhea@tcu.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology at Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth, TX 76129.

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