

Testimony of Deborah Yargar-Reed
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Thank you Chairwoman McCarthy, and members of the Subcommittee, for inviting me to testify today. I want to offer a special thank you to Ranking Member Todd Platts, my school's local Congressman.

Across the nation, obesity is on the rise in both children and adults, taking a toll on our quality of life. The prevalence of obesity among children aged 6 to 11 more than doubled in the past 28 years, going from 6.5% in 1980 to over 17.0% in 2008.

Obesity is the result of caloric imbalance (too few calories expended for the amount of calories consumed). Obese youth are more likely to have risk factors for cardiovascular disease, bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, social/psychological problems and lower academic achievements.

More time in front of the television and computer screens and less at play, coupled with increased calorie intake, are packing the pounds on today's youth. In the Upper Adams School District we wanted to meet this challenge head on and therefore we have come up with various strategies and programs to implement new ideas of physical activity and nutrition into our student's daily routine.

The Upper Adams School District is located in rural South Central Pennsylvania, and covers a geographical area of 90 square miles. The approximate population of the area is 10,000 residents. The size of the school district itself is 1,729 students which encompasses 5 schools (3 elementary, 1 middle school and a high school). Each year the Body Mass Index (BMI) is measured of each student within the district. I would like to share the statistics for the past 2 school years.

In the 2008-2009 school year there were 891 elementary students enrolled:

- 26 students had a BMI under the 5th percentile;
- 123 students had a BMI in the 85th - 95th percentile, putting them in the "at risk" category; and
- 208 students had a BMI greater than the 95th percentile, putting them in the "obese" category.

In the 2007-2008 school year there were 898 elementary students enrolled:

- 18 students had a BMI under the 5th percentile;

- 163 students had a BMI in the 85th - 95th percentile, “putting them in the “at risk” category; and
- 202 students had a BMI greater than the 95th percentile, putting them in the “obese” category.

In 2006, I attended the Wellness Institute at Dixon University. Requirements for the class included the creation and implementation of a wellness project within the Upper Adams School District. This policy became our district’s Local Wellness Plan, as required by the 2004 Child Nutrition Act, and we began implementation of the plan in the 2006-2007 school year.

Activities, which have developed out of the Wellness plan, include a monthly event which engages the students and staff in physical activity and or nutrition. A few of these events include:

Jump rope for heart – thirty minutes of “physical activity” daily. An event which raises money for the American Heart Association.

Tailgate activity – to promote school spirit, physical activity and nutrition for all students to participate, followed by a healthy snack of fruits and vegetables. The tailgate activity takes place in September. All students are encouraged to wear their favorite football jersey on tailgate day. The students engage in football related physical activities such as passing a football, running and carrying a football, and punting a football. After all the students have played their football challenges they are then given healthy snacks which consists of fresh fruits (grapes, watermelon, apples, oranges, cantaloupe) and vegetables (carrots, cucumbers, broccoli) as well as 100% fruit juice. Parents provide the healthy snack for the students to enjoy.

Apple crunch – schools across Pennsylvania celebrate the Great American Apple Crunch. This event was organized by the Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity (PANA). (PANA works with schools to help promote healthy eating and physical activity to prevent child obesity.) At this event, local fruit farmers in the area donate apples.

Go Greens – a statewide celebration that takes place in March that helps schools and communities focus on the important role of vegetables as part of a healthy diet. The event is held in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and it supports National Nutrition Month and the consumption of Pennsylvania produce.

All Children Exercise Simultaneously (ACES) – by gubernatorial proclamation, the first Wednesday in May is the state’s annual Keystone Healthy Zone Event Day, which also coincides with the worldwide observance of ACES day to promote good fitness habits.

Family Fitness – a monthly evening program designed for students and their families to come out and exercise and participate in scheduled activities and share a healthy snack.

Market Basket of the Month – brings together the school cafeteria, classrooms, home and community through a strategic effort to promote healthy habits for students. Objectives include knowledge and familiarity with a variety of fruits and vegetables as well as participation in daily physical activity. Wellspan provides this opportunity for our school district. We are currently one of six school districts across PA who have been selected to implement this Market Basket program.

A Family in Motion – This project is part of our Growing Healthy Kids School Partnership with Wellspan Health. The healthy Fitness Zone School Partnership programs are designed to help young children get into the habit of being physically active. The program features a backpack filled with fun activity ideas and equipment for family activity time and help children develop motor skills. The backpack is taken home with each student for a one week timeframe.

Eat Smart Play Hard – an educational two-part series program presented by Wellspan. The ABC's of healthy eating (**A**djust portion size, **B**e a label reader and **C**hoose more healthful foods). Participants help to prepare a sampling of healthy foods. Bring your sneakers – we are on the move is part two of the series. These are creative ways to decrease screen time and get the family moving.

Culminating activity – the students went on a fieldtrip to the local grocery store. This helped support nutrition principles that focus on the importance of making sensible food choices to build a healthy body. Students also became familiar with how to read a food label.

Taste Test – a favorite event for the students is food sampling, better known as the polite bite. Students are encouraged to try a new fruit or vegetable and then asked to go home and share that experience with their family. Examples of fruits sampled include: kiwi, star fruit, mango, pomegranate just to name a few.

I am pleased to share with you changes that have been implemented in our school cafeteria, as a result of the collaborative nature of the Local Wellness Plan. Rather than serve whole milk students may choose from 1% or fat free milk. White bread is something of the past. When sandwiches are served either on bread or rolls they are now multi-grain or wheat. A change has been made from potato chips to the “baked chip.” Rather than serve students baked goods daily the cafeteria has done away with that and serves fresh fruit or canned fruit. Baked goods are now a “WHOA” food in our cafeterias. Snacks that the students may purchase after finishing their lunch are healthier selections as well.

The cafeteria has posted the following signs around for the students to have a better understanding of “GO,” “SLOW,” and “WHOA” foods. Teaching the students this concept will help them make smarter food choices:

- “GO” foods are those that can be eaten almost anytime;
- “SLOW” foods are those that should only be eaten sometimes (at most only several times a week); and
- “WHOA” foods are those that should only be eaten once in a while or on special occasions.

Classroom teachers are no longer using candy as a positive reinforcement for those students who finish their homework or complete various tasks that are asked of the students. Rather a reward these days may be extra recess time.

Our District has created a School Health Advisory Council networking forum to oversee the wellness policy implementation. Our committee consists of school administrators, physical education teachers, health teachers, family & consumer science teacher, school nurse, food service personnel, parents, guidance counselors, and representatives from Wellspan Organization (our local health care system).

Initially the Advisory Council was created to advise and recommend nutrition standards to the school board and administrators through the wellness policy. The first task of the council was to create a draft wellness policy. Now that the draft was accepted, the Advisory Council makes recommendations on activities to the school board, such as the PANA activities that individual schools participate in. The Advisory Council also reviews potential school fundraisers to ensure they fall within the wellness plan. The Advisory Council meets 4 or 5 times each year. To date, the recommendations of the Advisory Council have been received with mixed reactions. We have experienced different levels of support throughout the district for our efforts to focus on nutrition and physical activity.

The Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity, known as PANA or more recently as NRG Balance, sponsors an annual campaign to recognize Pennsylvania schools and community centers for their work and commitment to “make healthy easy” for the youth they serve. The campaign provides resources, materials, and training to help schools improve nutrition and physical activity. Biglerville Elementary School has been a member of this campaign since the 2004-2005 school year. Biglerville has taken part in a number of PANA activities through this campaign, including the Annual Webcast, Great Apple Crunch, and Go for the Greens.

There are also professional development opportunities for the staff to participate in, including attending the Keystone Health Promotion Conference as well as the yearly Pennsylvania State Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (PSAHPERD) conference. New ideas and insight is gained to share with the staff and students in the area of Health and Wellness at these conferences.

Change is not always a welcome initiative. However, in the Upper Adams School District we feel that if we keep plugging away and making contacts with various local personnel, and resources such as Wellspan, Penn State Extension offices, just to name a few, and continue to find funding through grant writing opportunities, we can maintain the path to wellness for our students. Of course, we have experienced some negative response to the suggestion of “healthier” choices, but that is becoming a thing of the past as we continue to promote the healthy choices.

In closing, study after study proves what educators have long believed to be true: when a child’s basic nutritional and fitness needs are met, they have the cognitive energy to learn and achieve. Schools continue to be a core place for students to learn and practice healthy eating habits, and can also be a primary place to gain the knowledge, motivation, and skills children need for lifelong physical activity. Schools are in a unique position to address children’s eating habits and be instrumental in efforts to reduce childhood obesity because of the significant amount of time that children spend in school and the number of children enrolled in schools. Schools can impact children’s eating habits through the foods offered, classroom health education presented and the messages students receive throughout the school environment. It is imperative students learn to live a healthy lifestyle.

We are trying to make the students aware of this each day as we promote the healthy choices and physical activity in fun and creative ways. I feel that on a local level we have made a real difference in the lives of our students by making them aware that there are small changes they can do to be healthy. My job is to offer education to enlighten students that small steps are possible, like drinking 1% milk or going for a walk with their parents after dinner instead of sitting in front of the television. These decisions can make a big difference in their overall health and, therefore, their life.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today and I look forward to your questions.