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News

Local support, concern for childhood obesity plan

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Marilyn McSween grew up on Mayfield's Fruitland Avenue back when it was full of apple orchards. Her parents raised her on food from their own garden and to consider meal preparation an art, a science and a social event.

"These values are part of an innate and learned intuition that is passed on from generation to generation, unless popular culture overrides, changing the environment," said her son, Robert McSween.

Marilyn McSween died in 2000. But in today's culture of soft drinks, video games and inactivity where obesity affects one in three kids, Robert McSween said he thinks his mom would have been thrilled to hear first lady Michelle Obama unveil her national "Let's Move" campaign last week.

He bases this on his mom's own efforts to use her knowledge from owning a health food store to help the Richmond Heights School Board create a federally mandated student junk food policy with then-board President Sonja "Sonnie" Berger.

"I think I was in seventh or eighth grade when that happened, so I wasn't really part of the adult conversation," McSween said.

"But I remember them talking about it and everybody was up in arms over the pop machines and candy, and then all of a sudden there appeared the vending machines dispensing apples, oranges, pears and sunflower seeds, and that's what we all bought.

"The kids bought all the fruit when it was made available."

In her first high-profile policy role, Michelle Obama pledged Feb. 9 to work with government, medicine, science, business, education and athletics to solve the problem of childhood obesity in a generation.

The four-pronged approach, kicked off by the establishment of a Task Force on Childhood Obesity, includes partnership with athletes from a dozen professional leagues, the Walt Disney Co., NBC Universal and Viacom to better educate parents and children; a \$10 billion investment to fund legislation for national school nutrition standards; a \$400 million investment to bring grocery stores to underserved areas and help places like convenience stores carry healthier options; and community-wide initiatives to get kids more exercise each day.

Kelly Minnick, Riverside Schools' director of nutrition services, works actively with the School Nutrition Association and applauds the national spotlight.

Minnick said the lack of national school nutrition standards discourages food manufacturers from spending as much as \$100,000 to reformulate one food product for better nutrition — and the more bad options there are, the more power they have over kids' choices.

Among the products she's worked to get into Riverside Schools, meanwhile, are locally grown apples and baked, organic Hippy Chips made by Rock-n-Roll Gourmet. Marketed toward teens with cool packaging, fun flavors and unique chip shapes, they pack only 90 calories a bag, she said.

"I had to find someone who would bring it in for us, but kids are buying it," she said. "A lot of foods affordable to us are processed. Anything else has to be something the kids are going to buy and then re-buy if they like it."

Programs like Fit for Fifteen, which gives Willoughby's Longfellow Elementary students 15 minutes of exercise each morning, will be used as models in the first lady's campaign. Principal Ruth Ann Plate said the program, now in its second school year, produces more focused learning and health-conscious students.

Some have even lost weight and kept it off.

"I think it's become very much an integral part of our school life here at Longfellow," she said. "All of our students feel a little blah without having had that workout in the morning; it's fitness as a lifestyle change as opposed to an exercise program or a diet — really a commitment to better, healthier living."

Of course marketing is everything, said Leslie Skinner, Kirtland Schools' director of food service. Removing sugary, salty, fatty foods from cafeterias in an outright fight against obesity might not appeal to kids, but pegging it as a challenge or game might.

"We do use whole grain products, we incorporate dark green vegetables into our salads, we use low-fat cheeses, we serve fresh fruits, but we don't advertise that," she said. "I don't put on the menu, 'Look, kids, we're having whole grain pancakes today — your pizza crust is made with whole grain,' because I think kids shy away from that stuff. But products with good taste and eye appeal, they'll accept them."

Understanding something is the first step toward improving it, many local voices agree.

However, Newbury Schools Superintendent Richard Wagner is worried about unfunded mandates for his 650-student district, and three-fourths of "Let's Move" seems aimed at schools — many of which have already eliminated things like fried foods, slushies, ice cream days and high-fat snack foods.

"If I do my calculations correctly, if kids ate lunch here every day and bought it from the school, they'd have 178 lunches, but they eat 1,095 meals a year," he said.

"We have them for 16 percent of their meals, so I don't know how making schools responsible for obesity makes sense. Of course we want kids to be exercised more, go out and play, to have healthy eating habits, but I'm not sure we can even have a major share in that piece."

Cutting back on fried foods, slushies, ice cream days and high-fat snacks have also resulted in fewer lunch sales, he said, forcing the district to transfer \$58,000 from its general fund to balance its cafeteria budget last fiscal year.

He said other county schools have even higher numbers — \$170,000 in West Geauga, \$160,000 in Chardon, \$97,000 in Cardinal, \$95,000 in Berkshire.

"We've certainly made health foods more available, but I'll tell you what: If schools start selling brussels sprouts and asparagus in lunch lines, the lines aren't going to be very long," he said.

Confronting childhood obesity on a psychological level — without stigmatizing heavier or fuller-formed children among their peers, for instance — will also be critical, said Mentor Schools' school social worker Christie Graf.

It'll take more than fresh foods to

work through personal roadblocks to fitness.

"I really view eating as a boundary issue, learning what their limits are, and some kids use it to cope," Graf said. "We have to provide wrap-around services: you look at the psychological, the mental, the emotional and the physical aspects. If you don't do that, you're going to miss something."

Unfortunately, Berger said her effort with Marilyn McSween was overcome by a loss of food revenue at sports games and in school.

“The bottom line was they determined anything with peanuts in it wasn’t junk food,” she added.

“It’s an uphill battle unless you get support from the federal government, they can’t enforce it.”

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