

Children's HEALTH

Healthy Schools, Healthy Kids

by David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D.

(NAPSA)—It's no secret that America is getting fat. Americans are supersizing their way into lives riddled with the health problems—diabetes, heart disease and cancer—that obesity breeds.

Diseases attributable to overweight and obesity are costing our nation more than \$120 billion annually and, tragically, over 300,000 preventable deaths per year. Left unabated, obesity will overtake tobacco as the leading cause of preventable death in this country.

A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* documents that the trend is continuing. It showed that among adolescents aged 12 to 19, the percentage of overweight increased to almost 16 percent in 1999-2000, compared to 10.5 percent when previous estimates were made in 1988-94. Among children between the ages of 6 and 11, there was an almost fifty percent increase in overweight from less than a decade ago.

Now is the time to take a hard look at the foods our children are eating at school.

Just over a year ago, when I was U.S. Surgeon General, we released the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*. In that report, we identified the school environment as a critical setting to begin tackling this epidemic. It is penny-wise and pound-foolish when schools, faced with budgetary constraints, have to cut physical edu-



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cation and nutrition education programs. Studies have shown that physical activity and good nutrition improve students' academic performance, concentration, mood and discipline.

Schools need our support to help them deliver the kind of education—academic, nutrition, and fitness—children will need to succeed in their adult lives.

That is why I chaired the Healthy Schools Summit, a groundbreaking collaboration of more than 35 national education and health organizations and government agencies taking action to improve the health of our nation's children. Because she sees this as a critical issue to our country's future, Mrs. Laura Bush served as Honorary Chairman. The Summit mobilized participants from almost every state to act as catalysts for

positive change at the local level. These leaders have now returned home with the information, energy, and tools necessary to begin making a difference. They will support schools in establishing programs aimed at creating life-long healthy eating habits and physical activity patterns that will help each child reach his or her true potential—the greatest investment we can make in our future.

Maybe it's a leap to look at our spending \$120 billion a year treating the consequences of obesity and connect that to the fact that schools can't afford to provide physical education classes and nutritious, appealing food offerings. But that is the challenge we as a nation must face. For once we connect these two realities, we can consider redirecting the money that we're spending on treating diseases caused by overweight and obesity to spending the money on preventing these conditions in the first place, creating more opportunities for us all to lead more productive lives. That means giving schools the tools they need to provide students with nutritious food options, physical education, and a head start to a healthy lifestyle.

• *David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., former U.S. Surgeon General, is Chairman of the Healthy Schools Summit and Director of the new National Center for Primary Care at the Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia. For more information on how to create healthier schools, go to www.actionforhealthykids.org.*