



We urge you to oppose mandatory BMI reporting in the schools.

What is mandatory BMI reporting? Since 2003 a number of states have enacted legislation requiring schools to measure and report student's BMIs to parents as a strategy for combating obesity. A few other states have passed legislation requiring schools to measure BMI without the requirement to report to parents. BMI stands for Body Mass Index and is a formula used for measuring body weight (weight /height²). While this is a handy measurement for obesity, it is not based on scientific evidence and is thus held in suspect by many experts as a meaningful measure of weight and health.

Why is mandatory BMI reporting a bad idea?

No research basis. Currently virtually no data is available on the efficacy of this policy. Will it have a positive impact on children's weight and help reduce obesity in the nation? Or could it actually have negative consequences? Without evidence of its merits we fear this policy will do harm.

Redundant and inappropriate. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers guidelines to practicing pediatricians that they track BMIs as part of their routine health care. The standard practice for pediatricians is to measure a child's body weight upon yearly examinations. Pediatricians are trained to not only do this appropriately but also to professionally advise parents and children if BMI rates rise significantly. *The doctor's office is the appropriate environment for measuring weight not the schools.*

Information without meaningful strategies. The public is bombarded with contradictory information about healthy eating, healthy weight and effective strategies for weight loss daily. How do parents navigate all this data and properly guide their children? Some parents may focus on the child's weight as another important arena for achievement and encourage diets and other weight loss strategies that could inadvertently be harmful. Mandatory BMI reporting forces parents to walk the fine line between encouraging healthy eating and risky weight loss strategies that can put the child at risk for developing negative body image and eating disorder symptoms.

Could do harm. While there is no data to suggest mandatory BMI reporting would result in positive outcomes, there is research to suggest that it could in fact do harm. A focus on weight often has a boomerang effect. The area of athletics is a prime example. When body weight is emphasized as a criteria for determining success in sports (such as wrestling, gymnastics or ballet), we see a higher prevalence of people with eating disordered behaviors and an adverse impact on performance.

Puts people at risk for the development of eating disorders. Individuals simply told they are too fat can be at risk for using dangerous weight loss strategies such as the use of amphetamines, intestinal bypass, fasting, very low calorie diets, laxatives, purging, etc. Such dangerous weight loss strategies are associated with negative health outcomes including death. Restrictive dieting can lead to decreased cognitive performance, negative body image, depression, binge behavior and the onset of eating disorders. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of all the psychiatric disorders.

Puts people at risk for bullying and teasing. Bullying has become an increasingly notable problem for schools and parents alike. BMI reporting is likely to promote fat-related stigma where children are at risk for being called names such as "fatty, fat girl, lardo," and so on. Research shows that being fat is a common reason for taunting and teasing.

Solution: Promote healthy environments that support healthy behaviors.

Exercise. Physical activity has indisputable physical and mental health benefits. Schools should maximize opportunities for exercise among students in gym class. As the benefits of physical activity and fitness to health are already known, mandating physical education would be a wiser strategy than mandating BMI reporting.

Availability of nutritionally healthy foods. Children are more likely to choose healthy food options if they are available. The success of Senator Tom Harkin's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program in over 100 schools is testament that providing children with free fresh fruits and vegetables allows them

to make wiser food choices, which will improve health. Schools need to offer nutritionally healthy food options both in the lunch rooms and in school vending machines. For example, soft drinks that are high in simple sugars and caloric content, negatively impact concentration and could be replaced with juice and water.

States Rethinking Mandatory BMI Reporting.

As states implement BMI-specific legislation, some law makers are taking note of concerns regarding the requirements. Senator Kim Hendren, an original supporter of the Arkansas legislation mandating BMI testing of students, introduced an act that would repeal the requirement, noting that since the policy's enactment some athletes are being incorrectly labeled as overweight. Maine enacted legislation in 2005 to address childhood obesity in the state only after an amendment was added that eliminated a provision requiring BMI testing. Although legislation was introduced in Georgia in 2005 to mandate BMI testing and parental notification, one sponsor of the bill, Representative Stephanie S. Buckley, chose to not pursue the legislation after receiving concern from constituents that the measure could harm students' self-esteem. In Maryland a measure to implement mandatory BMI testing of all students in the state failed after receiving a negative report from the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.