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In Arkansas, Schools Plan to Score Children's Weights

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Schoolchildren are used to getting grades in math, science and English. Now, Arkansas state officials want to score them on their weight.

Alarmed at the growing number of overweight children in their state -- Arkansas has a higher percentage of overweight high-school students than the national average -- state health experts have pressured lawmakers to do something about it. A law enacted in April calls for the state's 308 public schools to record their students' weights and heights and then send the results home.

Beginning with this school year, the schools will be required to calculate each student's body-mass index, a ratio of weight to height used by the U.S. government to determine if a person is overweight. Scores for the 450,000 students from kindergarten through grade 12 are to be reported to parents, along with nutritional advice.

The law, which also bans soft drink and snack sales in elementary schools and charges a new committee of health and education officials with improving nutrition and exercise programs, represents one of the most aggressive steps yet by a state to tackle the growing problem of childhood obesity.

Few states have enacted such laws, although more than 30 similar bills and resolutions have been proposed in state legislatures, according to the Commercialism in Education Research Unit, a group at Arizona State University that tracks bills related to school commercialism and student health. A few schools in other states are screening children for weight, but the practice isn't widespread.

In Arkansas, some parents worry that sizing children up by their appearance will stigmatize and embarrass the very kids it is meant to help, many of whom are in low-income families. "There's already enough peer pressure in schools," says Karon Parrish,

the mother of a 13-year-old boy in Monticello, Ark., who recently slimmed down. She complained about the new policy in a letter to state legislators and the governor's office.

Some school administrators, meanwhile, say screening will require money, staffing and time when such resources are already in short supply. With one school nurse for 2,100 students, Norman Hill, superintendent of the Monticello school district, says the program will pose a host of logistical problems and create "a tremendous amount of paperwork." He also fears weigh-ins will humiliate his students.

The health officials and lawmakers behind the weigh-ins say parents need to be better informed of the health risks of obesity. About 15% of U.S. children are considered overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. In Arkansas, nearly 14% of high-school students are overweight, compared with 10.5% nationally, according to the CDC. Overweight children risk developing chronic diseases that will plague them for life, including Type 2 diabetes, a growing problem among children that is triggered by excessive weight and inactivity.

"There's a tremendous cost to obesity," says Herschel Cleveland, Arkansas's speaker of the house, one of six legislators who sponsored the state's new law. Battling the bulge himself, he says reporting weight problems to parents could help them prevent health problems with their children. "It could help us say, 'Your child could be headed for major medical problems in the future, and you might want to see a doctor.' "

Supporters of weight-screening liken it to vision and hearing tests routinely given to children in school. "Sometimes you need to see some numbers," says Carole Garner, assistant professor at the University of Arkansas Medical School's College of Public Health, who helped develop the new law. She says parents may not recognize weight problems in their children right away.

While BMI is a controversial measurement because in part it can make muscular people appear overweight, the American Academy of Pediatrics has endorsed it. This month it recommended that pediatricians screen all children and adolescents annually. An overweight child is a child whose BMI is equal to or greater than 95% of the indexes of other children in his or her age group.

Critics argue that while weight screening may be appropriate in the doctor's office, it isn't in schools. "Great idea, wrong setting," says Robert Whitaker, a childhood obesity expert and research fellow with Mathematica Policy Research, a social-policy research firm in Princeton, N.J. "It's not one in which the family context can be seen or understood. You run the risk of causing harm." Uninsured families could be told their child has a health problem but not have the money to see a doctor or other expert to address it, he adds.

At some Michigan schools that conducted weight screenings, parents complained their children went on extreme diets after learning their BMI scores were high, an education official says.

At some Florida schools, notes were sent home with the children, who sometimes opened their screening results and compared them, says a nurse who coordinated the project. The schools now mail letters directly to parents.

In a recent study of four Cambridge, Mass., elementary schools that sent home health "report cards" with weight and fitness information, researchers said they found the information helped get parents more involved in addressing their children's weight problem. But 60% of parents who got the reports and discussed a weight issue with their children said the news made their kids uncomfortable. "More research is needed to understand how this approach may affect overweight children's self-esteem and parents' intentions to initiate weight-control actions," the study concluded.

To avoid upsetting more parents and students, Michigan's Department of Education, along with state health and fitness officials, drafted weight-screening guidelines. The guidelines advise schools to inform the parents ahead of time about screening, conduct the screenings privately, and offer only supportive or neutral comments to children while they're being weighed. Weight screening isn't required by the state and is conducted by only a few schools, says Elizabeth Haller, a department of education official who helped craft the guidelines.

The new law in Arkansas originally called for BMI scores to be included on students' academic report cards. But after protests from parents, officials say the scores probably will be recorded in a separate letter. Parents also may be allowed to opt out of the report. The state's education department has told schools to hold off on screening until it develops guidelines for the program.