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Fat Students Sap School Finances

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(AP) Expanding waistlines are squeezing the bottom line of the nation's schools, as poor eating and exercise subtly strip money from education, a new study suggests.

"It's too risky not to call attention to this," said David Satcher, former U.S. surgeon general and founding chairman of [Action for Healthy Kids](#), a coalition of more than 40 health and education agencies behind the study.

With 9 million overweight schoolchildren, a number that has tripled since 1980, the new findings aim to give education leaders a traditional motivation for making changes: money.

At least nine states that get state money based on student attendance, for example, are losing an estimated tens of millions of dollars because of absenteeism, a problem caused in part by the poor nutrition and inactivity of those missing school, the study says.

Unhealthy lifestyles by students and faculty lead to other hidden costs, from lower worker productivity to the added expenses of helping students who have fallen behind, says the study.

Through their courses, menus and vending-machine sales of soda and candy, schools have huge influence and responsibility, the report says. Children spend 2,000 hours a year in school.

The findings are part of a flurry of efforts aimed at the nation's weight problem.

Next week, leaders of the federal education, health and agriculture departments will visit schools, announce grants and promote a national drive for healthy eating and exercise.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), meanwhile, says the nation has not made progress since 1991 in its goals to significantly increase exercise by students. Last year, only 56 percent of high school students were enrolled in a physical education class.

And Atkins Nutritionals, known for its low-carbohydrate diet plan, on Thursday announced a partnership with the nation's largest teachers union and other groups to reduce obesity.

Schools, which increasingly rely on vending sales to raise money for basic operations, often undermine themselves by offering high-calorie, low-nutrient foods, Satcher said. Sacrificing gym

classes to allow more lesson time in reading and math backfires too, he said, as studies suggest built-in time for exercise helps children focus and be less disruptive.

Satcher's group is promoting schools that have made healthy choices without losing money.

In the McComb School District in southwestern Mississippi, for example, leaders banned sodas from vending machines and steered students toward meals featuring fruit and vegetables. The district required 30 minutes of organized exercise each day in grades kindergarten to eight and made physical education courses a high school requirement. These changes, among others, boosted student attendance and school revenues, superintendent Pat Cooper said.

"Surprisingly, the kids have really acclimated well," Cooper said. "They're going to eat whatever's available. We have to teach them this, just like we teach math and English."

Satcher, the former surgeon general, said he views with caution the partnership between Atkins and the education groups. "Obviously, it helps provide funding to the schools," he said. "But we must make sure that what happens is in the best interest of children, not the advocacy group."

Atkins is giving money to the National Education Association, the teachers union, to develop a [Web site](#), and is underwriting a guide for state boards of education. It would not name the amount, but the figure is "well into the low- to mid-six figures," a spokesman said.

Atkins says it is targeting obesity, not marketing to kids.

"Simple steps like making sandwiches on whole grain bread, scaling back on sugary snacks and soda and encouraging a half-hour of exercise a day can keep children healthy," said Stuart Trager, Atkins' medical director.

But Neal Barnard, president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, accused the NEA of "selling out" to the private company.

Atkins will get credit for supporting the Web site but will have no say over its content, which will promote schools with model health programs, said Gerald Newberry, who oversees the NEA health division.

"I think they're being a good corporate neighbor," he said. "If we were promoting any diet, whether its Weight Watchers or Atkins, then I think that would be a problem."

By Ben Feller

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