

In Obesity Wars, a New Backlash

(The Wall Street Journal) - Brittany Burns, 12 years old, has always been on the heavy side. Last year in fifth grade, neighborhood kids started picking on her at the bus stop, calling her "fatty" and "chubby wubby." Then someone else piled on: Brittany's school.

In a letter dated Oct. 2, 2006, the Campbell County School District No. 1 invited "select students" to take part in a fitness and nutrition program set up for some of the district's most overweight kids. At 5 feet 2 inches tall and 179 pounds, Brittany qualified.

Receiving the letter was "embarrassing," Brittany says. Her mother, Mindi Story, a clerk at an Albertsons supermarket, says she seethed "pure anger" because, she argues, her daughter's weight shouldn't be the school's concern: "I send her to school to learn math and reading."

Spurred by a local doctor and an enthusiastic school board, Gillette has banned soda and second helpings on hot meals. This year, it included students' body-mass index -- a number that measures weight adjusted for height -- on report cards, and started recommending students like Brittany for after-school fitness programs. It even offers teachers the chance to earn bonuses based on their fitness.

While the extent of Gillette's weight campaign makes it an outlier, the school district is just one of many communities stepping up efforts to tackle childhood obesity. At the Buckeye Central Local School District in New Washington, Ohio, officials have replaced large cookies with smaller ones. Stewart Middle School in Norristown, Pa., has limited the number of snacks students can buy to one a day. Burning Tree Elementary School in Bethesda, Md., now asks parents to bring fruit and juice for class parties instead of chips and soda.

Arkansas, Pennsylvania and a few other states require that students' body-mass index be recorded and sent home to parents periodically. Starting this school year, a new federal rule requires that all school districts receiving meal subsidies create a "wellness policy" outlining goals for nutrition and fitness.

Many health experts approve, given how much time children spend at school. Schools create "social norms," says Marlene Schwartz, Director of Research and School Programs at Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. "The school is the perfect place to both teach things intellectually, but also create an environment where those lessons are reinforced."

But across the country, the new rules are also sparking a backlash among parents, children and even some teachers and school officials. The efforts often draw derision for being too extreme and demonizing children. Arkansas, the first state to pass legislation requiring schools measure students' body-mass index, backtracked last month and now allows parents to refuse the assessment. The question of weight in Arkansas has been a

sensitive one since former Gov. Mike Huckabee shed more than 100 pounds a few years ago and encouraged locals to follow his example.

Rosey Barbour was a member of the Gillette "Task Force" that devised the health initiative. Her 12-year-old son Taylor, who attends Rawhide Elementary, was bullied for being overweight. Then in December, the family received a letter inviting him to take part in a fitness and nutrition program.

Seth Barbour, Taylor's father, "was a little past mad," he recalls, given Taylor's sensitivity about his weight. The Barbours never told their son about the invitation.

While on the task force, Mrs. Barbour fought some of its initiatives, in particular the move to put BMI scores on report cards. "Everything the Healthy Schools Task Force has done has been controversial," she says.

Gillette is a dusty, bustling coal-mining center in northeastern Wyoming, bisected by a railroad operated by Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corp., which delivers coal to such cities as Chicago and Centralia, Wash. Against empty sky, a water tower proclaims the city the "Energy Capital of the Nation."

Fueled by that thriving industry, the town's population is booming. In the past five years, its population has risen steadily, by about 20% to 27,533. Tax revenue from local mines helps fund recreational activities for young, sports-minded families, including an Olympic-size swimming pool and a nine-hole golf course.

Wyoming redistributes local property-tax revenue statewide to ensure that poorer districts aren't left out. Campbell County is so wealthy, however, that its school district in recent years has received a "recapture rebate" after remitting funds to the state. The school district tapped that money to fund some of the health programs, to the tune of \$500,000 a year. The rest -- \$250,000 -- comes from the Campbell County Community Public Recreation District, which levies property taxes on energy companies.

About three years ago, for the first time in his nearly 20 years as a doctor in the area, school board chairman and local pediatrician David Fall started seeing cases of overweight children with diabetes. An informal survey of patients suggested that about 15% were overweight, close to the national average. Those who were overweight, he noticed, were "way overweight." At the school board, he says, "we decided this was an issue we should look into."

Across the U.S., about 17% of children and adolescents age two to 19 are overweight, more than triple the percentage of 30 years ago, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC defines overweight children as those with a body-mass index in the 95th percentile and above, which puts them at increased risk for chronic health problems such as hypertension, certain types of diabetes and heart disease.

In 2004, Dr. Fall organized the Healthy Schools Task Force and recruited about two dozen parents and teachers. First item on the list: Removing soda machines from schools in the district. "The biggest grief we got was from the teachers," Dr. Fall recalls, because schools also took machines out of teachers' lounges. "Some of them are still mad at me. They called me the 'Pop Nazi.' "

The task force decided students would no longer receive second-helpings of lunch entrées (they could have unlimited helpings of fresh fruits, vegetables and salad). It told lunch servers to give smaller portions to younger students. Concession-stand vendors received a list of recommended alternatives, such as fresh fruit and string cheese. School principals were pushed to dump bake sales in favor of car washes, talent shows and walkathons.

The task force also deployed financial incentives. Elementary schools that added physical activity received extra funding for instructors and after-school health programs. Based on the assumption that children emulate adults around them, the district in February began awarding bonuses to faculty who opted to receive a fitness assessment, which measured metrics such as blood pressure and bicep strength. The better the fitness score, the higher the bonus -- as much as \$160 if they take the test twice a year and get high marks.

Toward the end of 2004, parents started complaining at task-force meetings that their children were coming home hungry. One parent criticized the group for making unilateral decisions without involving the community.

"My kids are in every sport there is," says parent Mary Lou Gladson, who attended one of the meetings. "But they aren't big fruit and vegetable eaters. My kids were getting the short end of the stick because of the obese kids."

Even determining who is overweight has proven nettlesome. Nine-year old Jeremy Holwell, who attends Lakeview Elementary, swims in a local league several nights a week and plays baseball in the summer. Gesturing to his Spiderman-theme room littered with dozens of swimming ribbons and pentathlon trophies, his mother Stephanie says: "I mean, this kid's active."

In January, Mrs. Holwell noticed a fitness assessment at the bottom of his nearly straight-A report card. Jeremy placed in the 97th national percentile: "overweight," according to the report. She asked the principal to stop including the information on Jeremy's report card, which he agreed to do.

Sue Harter, the district's director of food service, says the strictures are becoming overly specific. Snacks sold during the school day can contain no more than seven grams of fat, no more than two grams of saturated fat, and no more than 15 grams of sugar, with a few exceptions. That means no french fries, Tater Tots or Twinkies. Ms. Harter was fine with that, but has balked at a proposal to take away other offerings, including beef jerky and baked chips. "I feel that kids junior high and up should be able to make choices," she says.

Talking about the district's campaign is hard for Ms. Harter. "I was a chunky kid. I've always struggled with my weight," she says, tears welling up. "Here I am, the director of food service, and I'm overweight." Because the new focus on faculty health, "it gives you a feeling of insecurity," she says.

Dr. Fall says that beyond a few negative comments, he doesn't think there has been much public opposition. In any case, the importance of the program "outweighs any temporary hurt feelings," he says. "The kids know they're overweight! They don't want to be overweight! They don't want to be unhappy."

This school year, Dr. Fall intensified his efforts. By December 2006, 171 parents of children in grades three through six had received a letter offering a children's health evaluation and a related fitness program.

Mike Miller, a physical-education teacher hired to run the Healthy Schools initiatives, asked PE teachers to recommend students who might benefit from the program, which would be held after school.

Jim Coca, a physical-education instructor at Wagonwheel Elementary, says he reluctantly gave about 20 names to Mr. Miller, based on the kids with the lowest fitness scores. "I would have rather seen all the kids get a letter," he says. "Make it available to everyone, and you've hurt nobody."

A fifth-grade girl approached Mr. Coca after noticing the letter, addressed to her parents, on the kitchen table. "Mr. Coca, do you think I'm fat?" he recalls her asking. "I knew it hurt our relationship a little bit. She had never thought that she was heavy." Next year, Mr. Coca says, he won't give names. He'll send the fitness data to Mr. Miller and ask him to pick.

Mr. Miller says the PE teachers "would be the better ones to assess kids," but he says he'll use the raw data if necessary. "It will be obvious to us from the BMI and fitness scores if the kid's at risk."

Of nearly 200 letters that went out to families, only 23 parents made an appointment. They were invited to a "Strong Kids Club" exercise group that meets after school at a local recreation center three times a week.

Erin Wiley, the assessment program's coordinator, is an enthusiastic, ponytailed 24-year-old who leads third to sixth graders in an hour of exercises. On a recent Tuesday, after teaching eight kids a leg exercise using resistance cords, she wound down the session with a series of yoga poses named after animals -- cobra, swan, downward dog, cat and cow.

"How much more of these are we going to do?" whined seven-year-old Ryan Quintana, a second-grader from Pronghorn Elementary School who suffers from asthma.

"It's a whole series!" said Ms. Wiley. "Want to see 'volcano'?"

Many of the families say the assessments and classes -- which are free -- have helped their kids.

Ryan, for example, was always bigger than his peers in his class, but seemed unaware of it until recently. "I noticed him saying, 'This shirt makes my belly look big' while getting dressed," says his mother, Jaime. "We realized he needs to lose weight."

He has been attending classes three times a week since the fall. He used to dread gym. Now, says his father, Robert, "he talks about how fast he was. I don't think he's Flash Gordon by any means, but he's come a long way."

By the time of his follow-up assessment, Ryan had grown an inch, to 4 feet 6 inches, and had lost two pounds, to 104. He went from a high "body composition," a measure of body fat, to moderate. His fitness level rose from "fair" to "average."

Before, PE class was "too hard for me," Ryan says. "I had to take my inhaler." Now, he says, it is "not so scary."

Faith Rudland is a 10-year-old fifth-grader at Conestoga Elementary who also attends the fitness classes. When her mother, Heather, received the invitation letter, she was relieved to be getting some help.

"It's not like I'm blind," Mrs. Rudland says. The family had sought the advice of doctors and dieticians to bring down Faith's weight, but nothing worked. One said to watch sodium intake. Another said she would grow into her weight.

When Faith started the Strong Kids Club, she weighed 163 pounds. Now she weighs 145. "It's a learning process for me, too," says Mrs. Rudland, who has cut back on Hamburger Helper and now stocks the fridge with fruit and vegetables.

Faith says the classes "make my life a lot better." She now doesn't get as winded when she runs and earns higher marks in PE.

For other families, the program is an unwelcome intrusion. Brittany Burns "has been a big kid since she was little," says Mrs. Story, her mother. "We're a big-boned family, as is a lot of Wyoming. It's a meat and potatoes state," she says.

Later, she prepares a dinner of exactly that when her husband and brother-in-law come home from the mines, their faces and hands black with grime.

Mrs. Story says that when the letter came, she decided to give the program a chance. She took her daughter, who attends Lakeview Elementary, to an assessment. Brittany started writing down what she ate. By the end of the week, her enthusiasm flagged. She never went back for a follow-up.

"I didn't push the issue," says Mrs. Story. "I didn't want her to think I saw her the same way these people saw her."