

Black Childhood
OBESITY
What's Behind It, How to Beat It?

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INTRODUCTION

DeWayne Wickham



When Fannie Lou Hamer famously said she was “sick and tired of being sick and tired,” the Mississippi civil rights activist was talking about the abuses that blacks suffered at the hands of white Southerners in the 1960s.

But her words could just as easily be used today to describe the far-reaching impact that obesity has on African Americans – especially black children. Obesity is the taproot of a long list of diseases that disproportionately afflict blacks in this country. It gives rise to hypertension, diabetes, heart disease and some forms of cancer.

While this report seeks to bring increased attention to the ravages of obesity, there is nothing new about the harm this plague does to blacks, whose disproportionately high levels of obesity-related health problems leave many “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Ironically, Hamer – who appeared to be overweight much of her adult life – was just 59 when she died. In the final months she battled breast cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Obesity likely contributed to the early deaths of many other famous blacks who struggled with their weight. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson was just 60 when she succumbed to heart disease. Former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson suffered a fatal heart attack at age 65, and R&B singer Luther Vandross had been hospitalized by a stroke when he died at 54.

While death came to each of them much too early, for many blacks obesity begins to take its deadly toll long before they reach adulthood. And it is for this reason that the Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies has undertaken this reporting project, “Black Childhood Obesity: What’s behind it, how to beat it?” We hope the stories on the following pages will spur discussion of black youth obesity among those who suffer from this problem – and those who can help do something about it.

The primary mission of the journalist is to “seek truth and report it.” In doing so, we hope that, more often than not, knowledge will empower people to make the right decision about their lives – and the lives of others.

On the cover: Kaswanna Kanyinda, who is 14 and weighs nearly 300 pounds, has been courageously battling her obesity. Her goal is to be able to wear a size 15 dress at her high school prom.

Part I: The Creeping Epidemic

Obesity: The killer that is stalking black children

By Sherrel Wheeler Stewart



Kaswana Kanyinda

When she is old enough to go to her high school prom, 14-year-old Kaswana Kanyinda says she wants to wear a pretty dress and walk through the door with her own “Prince Charming” on her arm.

She also wants that pretty dress to be a size 15 or 16.

Those are dream sizes for the Raleigh, N.C. teenager, who now wears a woman’s size 24 and is struggling to shed much of the nearly 300 pounds that she weighs. Her heftiness also has her battling adult maladies such as high cholesterol, gallstones and a hormonal imbalance.

That’s why Kaswana is making small steps to prepare for her big date – and a healthier future beyond that.

In November, Kaswana began a Duke University fitness program – one that offers scholarship assistance for low to moderate income families. Among other things, the program emphasizes gradual, rather than drastic, changes toward permanent weight loss.

She’s been incorporating those changes into her daily life, such as eating only one of the three for \$1

cookies that she buys at school and giving the other two to friends. By February, Kaswana had lost around 15 pounds.

“I’m having success,” she said. “I know that the small, tiny changes make a difference.”

Kaswana is not alone in her struggle to control her weight. Throughout urban and rural America, black children are getting bigger. Thousands are clinically obese, meaning they have a body mass index, or BMI, of 30 or higher.

A normal body mass index – which measures the ratio of fat on the body in proportion to one’s height – is between 18 and 24.

Unfortunately, not enough of these at-risk youngsters are following Kaswana’s lead in getting help to reduce their weight. According to data from the American Obesity Association, around 36 percent of black kids between 6 and 11 are overweight – meaning they have a BMI of 25 and 29.9.

Nearly 20 percent are obese.

The number of overweight black kids increases once they become adolescents and teenagers. Nearly 41

percent of black youths ages 12 to 19 are overweight and 23.6 are obese.

While Mexican-American youths were slightly more overweight and obese than black youths, white youths had overweight and obesity rates that were lower than that of blacks.

The situation is especially scary for black girls like Kaswana.

Being overweight is a precursor to becoming obese, and among black girls ages 12 to 19, the percentage of those who were overweight increased from 13.2 percent in 1994 to 25.4 percent in 2004, according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

That means it nearly doubled in 10 years.

The news isn’t much better for black boys. The percentage of those aged 12 to 19 who were overweight went from 10.7 percent in 1994 to 18.5 percent in 2004.

“We’re seeing problems beginning as early as infancy,” says Dr. Sandra Moore, an Atlanta pediatrician and professor in the Morehouse College School of Medicine.

Another study from the National Institutes of Health found that girls who were overweight during childhood were 11 to 30 times more likely than non-overweight girls to be obese in young adulthood. In other words, large kids often become large adults, increasing the risk of other diseases.

“If a person is diagnosed with diabetes at 15, just think of what their life will be like when they are 35,” said Moore. The more serious complications of diabetes often begin after about 20 years, she said. “That means at 35, in the prime of life, that person is dealing with the possibility of blindness, limb amputations and other complications.”

Many of these problems have their roots in similar places – the plate, the fast food joint, and yes, the sofa.

Studies show that fast food restaurants pushing quick fried chicken wings, French fries, and hamburgers dot the inner city and rural landscape, making it easier for black kids to dine on food that is high in fat and calories, researchers say.

For example, in Selma, a city of 19,000 in Alabama’s Black Belt, finding anything other than fast food

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on Sunday evening is a challenge. Following a recent anniversary re-enactment of the 1965 civil rights movement voting registration march that has come to be known as “Bloody Sunday,” people made their way to the Steak Pit, apparently the restaurant open that day that featured a salad bar. Just about every other eatery open that day on the city’s main strip was a fast food restaurant.

Dr. Kathi Earles, an Atlanta pediatrician who teaches at Morehouse, sees the problem every day from her office in Southwest Atlanta.

“If I will go down the street, I will see a McDonalds, Mrs. Winners and a Wendy’s,” she said. “I can’t get a fresh fruit smoothie over here. For me to get salad, I have to travel 25 minutes.”

But on the other side of town in a trendy, mostly-white neighborhood, the culinary landscape is different.

“If I go to Buckhead, there is a Whole Foods grocery store and a Doc Greens. I can go in and pick up items, get a salad and a healthy sandwich,” she said. “I don’t have that here on MLK.”

Culture also weighs in heavily when it comes to factors that contribute to

overweight and obesity among black children. The welcome sight of a full plate, filled to the rim with fried food, vegetables seasoned with fatback and complimented by a hunk of cornbread, is too often the norm, doctors, nutritionists and researchers say.

But the way Roniece Weaver, a Tampa nutritionist and co-author of the book “Slim Down Sister,” sees it, the lack of physical activity among black children is a bigger culprit than fatty foods.

“Our youths are trapped inside,” Weaver said. “The things that entertain them now allow them to sit down and not be active... They are snacking and watching television. And they are snacking on the wrong things.”

Lack of activity is a big contributor to the weight problems of kids.

According to the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance report, nationwide 33.4 percent of students had not participated in sufficient vigorous physical activity and had not participated in sufficient moderate physical activity in the seven days prior to the survey.

Among black boys and girls, the percentage was even higher.

About 50 percent of black girls had not had vigorous to moderate exercise, compared to 37 percent for white girls. Among boys, 32 percent of blacks had not participated in vigorous to moderate exercise, compared with 25 percent for white boys.

To overcome these weight problems, children must change their eating habits and get more exercise and physical activity. Moore has started a program in Atlanta where she talks one-on-one with overweight

“The things that entertain them now allow them to sit down and not be active... They are snacking and watching television. And they are snacking on the wrong things.”

children and their parents to help them find realistic solutions to their problem.

They have to be given things they are actually able to do, Moore said. “They can have physical activity if there is access to the YMCA, boys and girls clubs and dance classes. But if all else fails, they can turn on the radio and dance. They can do things that are realistic,” she said. Addressing the obesity crisis can only be successful if the entire

family buys into the notion of making lifestyle modifications and sticking with those changes, doctors say.

“I had a mom who came to me, with some success with her 12-year-old son who was overweight, with high blood pressure, sleep apnea and asthma,” Moore said.

“He was able to lose 30 pounds because the mom changed the way she cooks.” The family used Splenda instead of sugar, and they reduced

the amount of high-fat foods in their meals, she said.

Robin Dickerson, Kaswanna Kanyinda’s mother, said her daughter’s dietary changes have helped the entire family. Like her daughter, Dickerson is a size 24. She wants her daughter to grow up smaller.

“We cut out the snacking. I have to encourage her not to eat just because she is bored,” Dickerson said. “So far,

with the help of the nutritionists, psychologists and other specialists at Duke, Kaswanna is making a change.”

Still, she has those difficult moments.

“My dad is African. Every time I am over there, there is lots of food,” she said. “They eat a lot of bread and then there’s the rice with rich sauces.”

In the Duke program, doctors stress the importance of changing what

goes into the bodies of youths’ said Dr. Sarah Armstrong, a pediatrician at Duke’s School of Medicine.

“They tend to drink a lot of sugary sodas – Yoohoo and fruit punch. What children should have is water and low fat milk, and 4 to 6 ounces of fruit juice a day,” she said.

That’s a prescription for a slow, but steady weight loss – the kind that Kaswanna hopes will get her to her high school prom in fine form.

Black obesity is fed by more than what goes into the mouth

By Sherrel Wheeler Stewart

“The entire family has to buy into making changes for a healthier life,” Armstrong said. “Everyone is looking for one solution to the problem, but just one solution doesn’t exist.”

One of the things that caused Kaswanna Kanyinda to gain nearly 300 pounds by the time she entered high school is that she fed her boredom by snacking each afternoon while watching television and doing homework.

But now, researchers say that black kids like Kaswanna are succumbing to more than boredom. They’re falling victim to subliminal messages being sent over the airwaves.

Studies show that fast food advertisements tend to target young blacks – a trend that may feed the obesity epidemic that is dogging black children. On top of that, other factors, besides too much fat-laden food, may be contributing to it as well.

A disproportionate number of black children live in impoverished environments in which polluted air and lead-based paints exacerbates the probability of asthma and other diseases. Those conditions make it tough for them to play outdoors and participate in enough physical activity to stop them from becoming fat.

Other roots of black youth obesity stretch back to infancy.

Black women – especially those who are among the urban and rural poor –

are less likely to breastfeed their babies. Breastfeeding is important because it conditions infants to understand when they are full and prevents them from piling on too much “baby fat.”

Some researchers believe that programs such as the federal government’s Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program unwittingly add to the problem by including provisions for free baby formula – and thereby discouraging breastfeeding.

“Breast-fed babies learn about self regulation,” said Dr. Sarah Armstrong, a Duke University pediatrics professor who specializes in weight management.

“When they nurse, they learn to stop eating when the milk flow stops,” she said. “With formula-fed infants, the flow of milk just continues.”

Also, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human services, breast-fed babies gain less weight and are usually leaner than formula-fed babies in their first year of development. Researchers say this may influence the children’s growth patterns in later years.

Television, too, has played a big role in spiking overweight and obesity rates among black children –

especially since advertisers have learned that they are a bigger captive audience than children of other races.

According to data from the most recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 67.2 percent of blacks watch more than three hours of television a day, compared to just 29.3 percent for whites and 45.9 percent for Hispanics.

Black females had the highest rate at 70 percent.

When children watch television, they “most often they are snacking, and the snacks going in the mouth are not healthy,” said Armstrong.

In a 2006 report, researchers Shin-Yi Chou, of Lehigh University, Michael Grossman, of the City University of New York Graduate Center, and Inas Rashad, of Georgia State University, analyzed the impact of television viewing on childhood obesity.

“There is widespread speculation that the exposure to food advertising may contribute to unhealthy food choices and weight gain,” the

report stated. “Despite lacking evidence showing the direct linkage between television food advertising and childhood obesity, several industrialized countries such as Sweden, Norway and Finland have banned commercial sponsorship of children’s programs.”

While that study did not include detailed information on the links between obesity, race and family income, Rashad said a few facts were clear. “Those with higher incomes had lower obesity,” he said.

Another study published in the April 2006 Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine took a more detailed look at advertising on television shows geared toward black



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children. That study suggested a relationship between the amount of calories they consume and the number of television advertisements they see during the day.

The researchers questioned television viewing on *Black Entertainment Television*, the Disney Channel and the WB network. More than half of the advertisements played during one summer week, between the hours of 3 p.m. and 9 p.m., were for fast food and drinks. And about 66 percent of those ads were on BET, the study showed.

The advertising and obesity study showed that children take in an extra 167 calories, often from advertised foods, for every hour of TV they watch. Duke's Armstrong works with a program that takes a complete look at a family's habits and environment to help combat obesity.

If they have a sedentary lifestyle that places them in front of a television with a remote or game control for hours each day, therapists help develop plans to get those young people moving – preferably away from the television, she said.

Kaswanna's mother, Robin Dickerson, said she and her daughter are struggling to incorporate exercise into their lives.

"We know we need to do some kind of exercise, but right now our schedules just don't allow the time," she said. "We've got to find a way to do it, though."

Armstrong said the impact of extended television viewing impacts youths in another way.

"Too many youths are not getting enough sleep," she said. "If they stay up all night, the next day they will be sluggish, and they will not feel up to a lot of physical activity. This can have an impact on their weight."

When poor sleep habits are combined with poor selections for food and nutrition, problems are compounded, she said.

Because so many factors contribute to obesity, doctors say it takes a broad approach to assessing its causes and working with families to find solutions.

"The entire family has to buy into making changes for a healthier life," Armstrong said. "Everyone is looking for one solution to the problem, but just one solution doesn't exist."

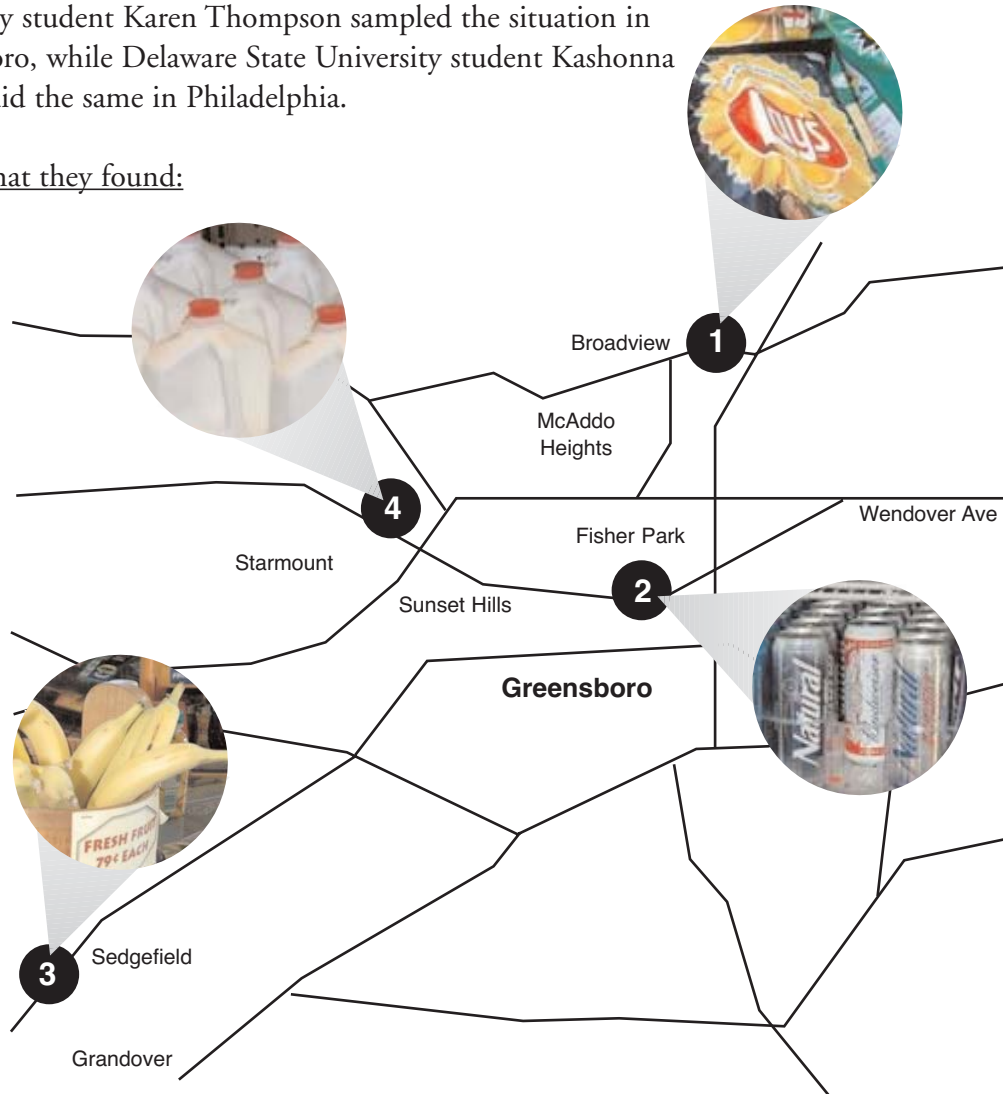


Obesity is fed by what black kids see as well as what they eat, researchers say.

The corner store connection: How disparities in healthy offerings abet the epidemic

Many times, being able to grab a quick healthy bite boils down to boundaries and income. North Carolina A&T State University student Karen Thompson sampled the situation in Greensboro, while Delaware State University student Kashonna Harvey did the same in Philadelphia.

Here's what they found:



GREENSBORO

Store Number 1

Area description: Low to moderate income.

Clientele: Mostly black, working class, many high school and college-age youths.

Junk factor: High. Doughnuts are in the front, as are snack crackers and chips. Candies are sold in packs and as individual pieces. Aside from snack foods, sodas and beer, canned foods such as Vienna sausages and corn are sold.

Health factor: Extremely low. Virtually no healthy food was available to purchase in this store. Even the whole milk was pushed to the back of the freezer. The cashier said the main items sold between 4 p.m. and midnight are candy, chips, cakes and beer.

Store Number 2

Area description: Low-income, high-crime

Clientele: Mostly black, working class, teenagers.

Junk factor: High. Rows of chips are at the entrance, as are soft drinks, candies and cookies. Beer was abundant.

Health factor: Extremely low. Whole milk is at the back of the freezer stuck amid the beer. White bread is sold in slices, as is hot dog and hamburger buns. Some cereal is available, but beer is the big seller here.

Store Number 3

Area description: New development, middle to upper-income.

Clientele: Mostly white, professionals, all ages.

Junk factor: Average. Chips and candy isles are in plain view upon entering the store.

Health factor: Good. Bananas and apples are sold near the checkout counter. Low-fat milk is sold here, as is wheat bread and a number of juices. Cereal is also sold in to-go packages.

Store Number 4

Area description: Suburban, middle to upper-income.

Clientele: All races and ethnicities, families, professionals, travelers who frequent nearby shopping center.

Junk factor: Average. Chips, cakes and snack foods are in plain view, but they are interspersed with peanuts and other nuts – which are considered healthy.

Health factor: Good. Reduced fat milk is sold here, and bananas and apples can be purchased in front of the checkout counter.

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PHILADELPHIA

Store Number 1

Area description: Upper to middle income.

Clientele: Mostly white, around a quarter black.

Junk factor: Average. Snacks, soft drinks, etc.

Health factor: Good. Wheat and rye breads are sold, as is skim and low-fat milk, and a variety of fresh fruit.

Store Number 2

Area description: Low to moderate income.

Clientele: Mostly black.

Junk factor: Average. Snacks, soft drinks, etc.

Health factor: Low. Only white bread and potato bread is sold is, as is whole milk and pre-battered fish. No fresh or canned fruit is sold.

Store Number 3

Area description: Low to moderate income.

Clientele: Mostly black.

Junk factor: Average. Snacks, soft drinks, etc.

Health factor: Average. It sells fresh vegetables and a variety of milk, but no wheat bread.

Store Number 4

Area description: Low to moderate income.

Clientele: Mostly black

Junk factor: Average: Sodas, chips, candy.

Health factor: Average: Bananas, wheat bread and a variety of milk is sold. The owner said he once offered more varieties of fresh fruit, but that it didn't sell.

A childhood beast often fed by denial

By Tonyaa J. Weathersbee

“...I think we’re also seeing more diabetics, more people that are hypertensive, than when I first came here.”



A&T students sweat to the beat of African music. An increasing number are arriving at college overweight or obese, and more is being done to help them get healthier, educators say.

GREENSBORO, N.C - Deana Melton has seen how unchecked obesity not only stymies black students’ health, but skews their reality as well.

That’s because Melton, an adjunct assistant professor in North Carolina A&T State University’s Human Performance and Leisure Studies Department, teaches sports science and fitness management. And, she said, anywhere from 15 to 20 percent of the 300 or so students who have chosen those majors are obese.

She estimates that another 30 to 40 percent are overweight.

“You would think that sports science and fitness management majors would be a little bit more aware of their physical being and their health, but we do have a few who are obese,” Melton said.

“A lot of students will say that they don’t have the time [to work out]. Many of them may have worked out when they were younger or in high school, and when they get to college, they become overwhelmed,” she said.

“Sometimes, I think a big part of it is denial...I don’t think they realize how out-of-control their weight is.”

Many times, such denial has been building since childhood – and A&T educators, such as Melton and Janet Lattimore, a public health educator at the Sebastian Health Center on the university’s campus, have been seeing how it catches up to black college students.

“We see a lot of foot injuries [caused by excessive weight on high heels],” said Lattimore, who has worked at the center for 16 years. She estimates that around 20 to 25 percent of the students who come through the center are either overweight or obese. It’s also not

unusual for them to see students who weigh more than 250 pounds, she said.

“If they have anything related to their obesity, it may be because of the type of shoes they’re wearing causes an accident,” Lattimore said. “...I think we’re also seeing more diabetics, more people that are hypertensive, than when I first came here.”



Deana Melton

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“A lot of students are in denial about it, because they don’t want to think about having chronic diseases at the ages they are,” she said.

Between 40 to 60 students come to the health center each day, Lattimore said. While most come in for gynecological and birth control services, as well as for physicals and issues related to sexually-transmitted diseases, center officials also realized that a number of students were having problems related to poor nutrition.

To deal with that issue, the center now refers students to a nutrition counselor. “We were getting requests for it,” Lattimore said. “The physicians were coming to the health educators, and we felt that more of a nutritionist would be better suited for special needs, because a lot of our students have a high need for a special type of diet.”

Those students, Lattimore said, are usually the ones who continue to run into health crises because their diet is out of control. “That student needs one-on-one care,”

said Lattimore, who also said that Sodexho, the university’s food contractor, can provide food for people on special diets.

Besides using a nutritionist to help students reverse weight problems that may have begun in childhood, the center also issues literature on the topic, as well as conducting health awareness campaigns. It also gives away apples to emphasize the point. It also uses the campus radio station to help get the word out about health and fitness.

Melton said that even though the overweight and obese students whom she teaches in fitness management and sports science may be in denial about their condition, many wind up snapping out of it because of the nature of the degree they’re pursuing.

“Some believe that they’re going to immediately be a physical therapist, and when they find out what the requirements are, they back off,” Melton said. “But a lot of them want to take the classes as a way to get their workouts in.”

Many students – including those who have children – begin to realize the error of their ways once they begin the classes, she said.

“I’ve had quite a few tell me that they’re trying to change the way they feed their kids,” Melton said. “We definitely have to start younger. When you start out as a child overweight, you’re more likely to be an overweight adult.”



Left: Janet Lattimore glances at a health center display that urges students toward a healthier lifestyle, while Deana Milton discusses the unfit condition of some of the school's fitness majors.

Part II: Fighting Back

At Browns Mill academics, not sugar, is on the menu

By Tonyaa J. Weathersbee



Yvonne Sanders-Butler.

LITHONIA, Ga. - At Browns Mill Elementary and Magnet School for High Achievers, a school tucked away in this Atlanta suburb, you'll find black children immersed in art, music and a number of activities aimed at expanding their horizons.

But don't expect to be hit up to buy bags of M&Ms or super-sized Snickers bars, or any other candies to raise money to pay for any of it. And don't even think about bringing anything into this school that might induce high blood pressure or diabetes.

You'll never get it past the principal.

"I felt very confident years ago that a lot of behavior and academic performance was connected to food and beverages that they [children] overindulged in," says Yvonne

brush with death to learn how to have a healthy life. So in 1999 she banned sugar, high fat and processed foods from the cafeteria menu – and began what she says is the nation's only sugar-free school.

"Basically, I had a pretty unhealthy lifestyle," said Sanders-Butler, whose efforts to keep her kids sugar-free has made her the subject of ABC, CNN and Fox News reports. She has also been featured in magazines such as Black Enterprise and Real Health, and has penned two natural dessert cookbooks, as well as a book on children's nutrition.

"I'm a native of rural Mississippi, and I grew up with a lot of cake makers and pie makers; some of the best," she said. "I became addicted to sweets and sugar, and it just went on from there."

Sanders-Butler said she persuaded parents to support her efforts by telling them if they purged their children's lunchboxes of snacks and foods that feed hyperactivity and other maladies; they would not only enhance their children's academic performance, but would help them live longer as well.

"So I said, 'Let me say this to you all. I'm not going to be responsible for killing these kids,' she recalled. 'But give me an opportunity to show you

what they're eating, and that if they're fit, it will turn their lives around. If they're already performing well, they'll be performing better. If they're average, they're going to be very good. And who would not want that?"

What she's doing seems to be working.

The school has 1,055 students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. Ninety-eight percent are black and 49 percent are on free or reduced lunch. Yet each year, its students post scores above the state average on Georgia's state assessment test.

Last year, its sixth graders scored in the top percentile on the reading, science, math and English portions of the exam, known as the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test.

Sanders-Butler believes that a culture of healthy eating and exercise has contributed to that success.

And the culture is pervasive. On bulletin boards in the hallways and in the classrooms, interspersed with information about famous black Americans are messages and slogans about good health – such as "BME is Sugar Free." Teachers also find ways to reinforce awareness about healthy eating into their class sessions.

Third-grade teacher Nina Graham

uses her students' snack break to do that. "We have a classroom Student of the Week, and during snack break, that student will ask everyone to show what they brought to eat," Graham explained. "Then, the student will hold up the snack and ask the class whether it's healthy or unhealthy."

The light-butter popcorn provoked a response of healthy. So did the light tortilla chips.

Sometimes, though, the students are torn. Once, Graham said, a Crystal Light On-the-Go drink packet that a girl brought in was rated unhealthy – until she pointed out that it was sugar-free.

"If it's something that's questionable, the class will ask to read the label," Graham said.

Then, there's the real meal – lunch. A recent cafeteria spread featured baked chicken fingers, corn sans butter, wheat rolls and side salads with lettuce and tomato – as well as a lunch



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“I eat like this because I’m forced to – but it’s good too.”

salad with grilled chicken. Only 2 percent milk was offered. Dessert was grapefruit slices or mandarin orange fruit cups.

Not much of this menu was going to waste.

Eleven-year-old Emani Tavares tore into her lunch salad – a selection she said she makes two to three times a month. “I think it just tastes better,” Emani said.

Next to her Dominique Steele, 12, devoured a lettuce salad drizzled in Catalina dressing that she had brought from home – along with what looked like fried chicken nuggets.

But Dominique was quick to set the record straight on that. “These are low-fat veggie nuggets, not chicken,” she said. “I eat like this because I’m forced to – but it’s good too.”

Then there was Junaluska Johnson, 11, who was hard-pressed to take a break from eating his lunch salad to talk about his dietary habits. “I eat like this at home,” he said. “I haven’t been to a fast-food restaurant in seven years.”

When asked whether he missed it, Junaluska said: “No. I don’t remember what it tastes like.”

It is that kind of conditioning that Sanders-Butler works to instill in all the students – few of whom appeared to be overweight. And, she said, it’s not that difficult. It merely requires some will and creativity in dealing with food providers and contractors.

For example, the drink machines at Browns Mill are only filled with bottles of Dasani water because that’s what she insisted upon, the principal said. Because Dasani is a product of Coca-Cola, she didn’t violate the school’s Coke contract by refusing to put Coke, Sprite and other sugary soft drinks in the machines.

“The Coke machines that they brought here was as wide as this window,” Sanders-Butler said, gesturing at her office’s picture window. “I told them, ‘We don’t do Coke here.’”

But, Sanders-Butler said, the Dasani water sells well at school, and it also sells well for fundraisers. “We sell water and natural fruit juices. We also sell fruit baskets,” she said.

Browns Mill also manages to get through holidays and birthdays without major cakes and processed sugary treats, Sanders-Butler said. “We do fruit and yogurts, a lot of fruit bars,” she said. “In the cafeteria, we bake natural banana breads or pumpkin bread, and we ice it with

cream cheese. We make schoolhouse cookies with oatmeal, raisins, pecans, whole wheat flour and eggs. We use a raw sugar, not a processed sugar...we have Italian ice, it’s organic.”

All of this is not to say that Sanders-Brown never encounters any challenges.

“When I first started out, I had a red velvet cake situation,” she said. The grandmother of an overweight student made him a red velvet cake, which Sanders-Brown said “must have weighed five pounds.”

When other students saw him eating the cake they told the teacher, who took it from him, the principal said. “And of course he tells mom and dad, and they e-mail the teacher, and of course they’re very, very distraught. Very upset,” Sanders-Brown said.

Eventually, Sanders-Butler set up a conference with the child’s parents – who happened to teach in the school system as well.

“So I kind of went point by point, that he was about 25 pounds overweight, and was spending more time worrying about what he was eating than his studies...,” Sanders-Butler said. “I told them, ‘You are educators and I know you want your baby to be healthy. That’s why children don’t eat cake here. If you



Emani Tavares.



Junaluska Johnson.

want it, you can pick it up [after school], but we’re going to take it up and replace it with a fruit...it’s a done deal.”

The boy’s parents decided to follow the rules, Sanders-Butler said.

“I believe parents love their children, and that they would do anything for them,” she said. “So I use that approach.” But, Sanders-Butler said, the same approach also works for the children.

“I knew that if I could get my kids to buy into the idea that health meant being beautiful, being strong, having nice teeth, having nice hair, beautiful skin like some of the

celebrities, well, kids are real vain, so they’d do it,” she said.

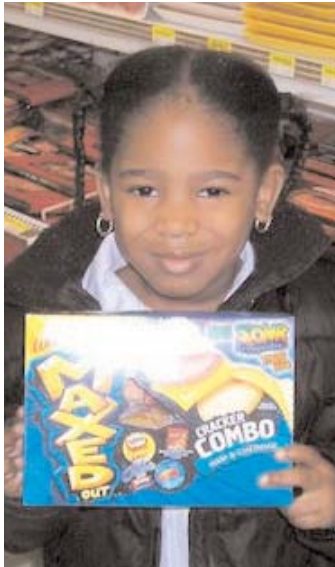
“I told them, ‘If you start eating better, you know you can be the smartest kids in the world.’”

Apparently, a lot of kids and their parents believe that. Which is one reason Browns Mill, which was a 2005 Georgia School of Excellence and a 2005 No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon School, is the largest elementary school in DeKalb County.

“And we don’t even have sugar,” Sanders-Butler said.

A tale of two cities, two strategies

By Gregory Kane



Choosing a healthy snack.

BALTIMORE. - Tactics in the fight against childhood obesity can vary widely by a distance of as little as 40 miles.

Dr. Mary Tierney is a senior research analyst for the American Institutes for Research. Her office is in a building located in the upscale Georgetown section of Washington, D.C.

Dr. Joel Gittelsohn's office is located in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, which sits in the 600 block of Wolfe Street in East Baltimore. The setting is

considered anything but swank. But both cities have predominantly black populations and growing Hispanic ones. Parts of both Baltimore and Washington, D.C. have high concentrations of poverty.

Demographic similarities aside, Tierney and Gittelsohn have adopted distinctly different strategies for combating childhood obesity.

Tierney, a pediatrician, has developed a series of lesson plans called the "Food, Fitness and Fun Module" for public schools in the District of Columbia and Montgomery County. The program is similar to the Harvest Time in Harlem that Slow Food USA runs for The Children's Storefront in Harlem.

Tierney's 21 lesson plans include a diet component and an exercise component. Students learn not only about the benefits of eating fruits, vegetables and healthy snacks, they learn about strong heart rates, flexibility and muscle groups. There's even one lesson entitled "Fast Food and Advertising."

Gittelsohn, a Ph.D., is an associate professor at the Bloomberg School. While he's not against in-school programs like Harvest Time in Harlem and the Food, Fitness and

Fun Module, he just feels they only address part of the problem of childhood obesity.

"I became convinced that a schools-alone approach is not going to be effective in preventing childhood obesity," Gittelsohn said. "Once the child steps outside of that school environment, there's a community environment and a family environment. I looked for an enhancement to the school-based approach."

The result was what Gittelsohn calls the "healthy stores project." His reason for focusing on stores was a simple one.

"If you're looking for community-based institutions that have an impact on what kids will eat," Gittelsohn reasoned, "you're really, in my mind, looking at food stores."

Gittelsohn got the idea for a healthy stores project when he was working in the Marshall Islands. He had been working on obesity and ways to prevent it since the early 1990s. The first healthy store started in the Marshalls. Then Gittelsohn started Apache Healthy Stores on two Arizona reservations, where the White Mountain and San Carlos Apaches suffered serious health problems from diabetes, obesity and

heart disease. Baltimore Healthy Stores came next.

Gittelsohn used just one word in describing how the process was in getting the Baltimore Healthy Stores project started.

"Challenging," he said. "I wouldn't have had one-fourth of the success I've had without a Korean student."

That student, Hee-Jung Song, attends the Bloomberg School of Public Health. She was instrumental in overcoming the language and cultural barriers that arose when Gittelsohn approached Korean store owners in inner city East Baltimore about signing on to the Baltimore

Healthy Stores project. With her help and the support of the Korean-American Grocers and Retailers Association, or KAGRO, Gittelsohn got seven Korean store owners to support Baltimore Healthy Stores.

The going was almost as tough when Gittelsohn approached supermarkets, which are few and far between in inner city Baltimore neighborhoods on both the east and west sides.

"I found it difficult to penetrate the bureaucracy," Gittelsohn said. But he did meet with success when he approached the black-owned Stop, Shop and Save food chain. Two of their stores in East Baltimore are in the project.



A healthy food display at a Baltimore corner store.

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Customers know immediately when they walk into one of the nine businesses designated Baltimore Healthy Stores. They may see signs like the ones that hang in the Sun Grocery, which Kyung Kim and his wife Soon Kim have owned the past 24 years.

"This food is healthy choice," the sign reads. It might be under the low-fat milk. Or it might rest just under that box of cereal that's low in sugar and high in fiber. Or it might be next to another sign that reads "Hold the mayo! Your heart will thank you!" And if the signs don't work, one of the Kims might do some personal intervention.



They genuinely care about their customers. A man who had only a light cough soon found Kyung Kim pressing a free pack of extra strength Tylenol in his hand. Soon Kim pointed to photos customers have given her of either themselves or their family members.

"She's 17 years old now," Soon Kim said after pointing to one picture of a toddler.

So it's no surprise that Kyung Kim gives his customers a little nudge away from unhealthy fare and toward the healthier stuff.

"Everybody want extra sugar," Kyung Kim said in his Korean accent. "I say, 'doctor say extra sugar is bad for you.'" Kyung Kim then steers them toward the Equal.

"The Hopkins student and the professor (Gittelsohn) say I can help my customers cut down on grease and sugar," Kyung Kim continued. When those customers head for regular



potato chips, Kyung Kim quickly morphs into Deputy Kim of the Food Police.

"I say 'potato chips have too much grease. Bad for you.' I offer them baked potato chips," Kyung Kim said. "They're good customers, but

they change hard. They still love sweets. They still pick up the sweet stuff. But they're drinking more water. Twenty years ago, they didn't drink it. Now they drink a lot of water."

Soon Kim has noticed a generation gap in food choices. It's the older customers, she said, who are more likely to change their eating and drinking habits.

"The young people? Um um," she said, shaking her head.

Tierney is hoping those young people change their eating habits through programs like the Food, Fitness and Fun Module. She's seen the results in



some schools. After one particular lesson, children were actually asking their parents to buy lentils for dinner and to pass on that trip to McDonald's. They were urging their parents not to sit in front of the television set but to get up and do stretching exercises with them.

But, like Gittelsohn, Tierney believes in-school programs can only go so far. She spends her time as a pediatrician urging parents to get more involved in their children's health care as a means to prevent childhood obesity. And she's noticed some things.

"Parents that tend to be obese don't notice obesity in their kids," said Tierney, who added that "it made me cringe when these children who were overweight came into my office crunching on Cheetos."

Tierney said parents should go into schools to see what their children are being served for lunch.



"See what the menus look like," Tierney urged. "And ask questions."

Tierney recalled "almost gagging" after going into one District of Columbia school and "almost smelling the grease." Some of the food the children were eating was

being cooked, Tierney said, "with these very bad trans-fats." And while parents are at those schools, Tierney urges them to make sure there's a recess period with plenty of physical activity.

Parents of already obese children should get them to a nutritionist, who will come up with a healthier diet. Those who think their children are at risk of being obese need to ask their child's pediatrician what the youngster's body mass index is. (The BMI determines what a person's normal weight should be, based on his or her height.)

Tierney said she and colleagues in the health field first noticed the increase



in childhood obesity during the 1990s.

"It sneaked up on us," Tierney said. "It's gaining very rapidly on tobacco as being the leading preventable cause of death."

The Children's Storefront: Slowing the march toward obesity in black kids

By Gregory Kane



Students from The Children's Storefront in Harlem get a lesson in apple variety.

NEW YORK. - It was the second Friday in February in the year of our Lord 2007 that 17 students at The Children's Storefront in Harlem got a lesson about a subject near and dear to their Snickers-loving hearts.

Chocolate.

But were their little eyes deceiving them? Could the woman in charge of giving this lesson be a staffer for Slow Food USA, an international organization whose brochure, *The Slow Food Companion*, says has a mission to "rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish

the degrading effects of Fast Food"? Could Slow Food USA — dedicated to the proposition that good nutrition is our friend — possibly be endorsing...chocolate?

Oh, you betcha.

The lesson on chocolate is just one of many that Yuri Asano, a chapter development coordinator for Slow Food USA, has drilled into the heads of roughly 20 students at The Children's Storefront for the past three years.

Slow Food USA started in Italy in 1986 as simply Slow Food. The first American chapter opened in 1991 in Portland, Ore. A national office opened in 2000, the year Slow Food was incorporated in this country. Slow Food's 80,000 members worldwide include 14,000 in the U.S. chapters.

The Children's Storefront is an independent, tuition-free institution that was founded in 1966. It has 170 students in grades pre-kindergarten through eight. Ninety-three percent of the students are black, 7 percent Hispanic. Eighty percent of Children's Storefront students receive

free or reduced lunches and 37 percent come from families on welfare, according to information from the school.

The attendance rate for Children's Storefront is 96 percent, well above the average of 80 to 83 percent for New York City schools. Nearly 93 percent of its graduates have finished high school or received a GED — numbers which dwarf New York City's graduation rate of 33 percent. Seventy-three percent have attended college.

Children's Storefront is the kind of school that inspires parents like Sylvester Truesdane, whose daughter Honesty attends the school, to work



there as volunteers. It was also one of those volunteers, Judy Joo, who inspired Asano to give her lesson about chocolate.

It came about because of — you guessed it — Snickers bars.

It turned out that Joo also worked as a volunteer for Slow Food USA. She noticed with some disquiet the dietary habits of quite a few of the students at Children's Storefront.

"They would forget their homework," said Asano, "but they never forgot to bring a can of Coke and a Snickers bar."

Joo figured students at Children's Storefront needed some good old, down-home educating about food and nutrition. She approached the folks at Slow Food USA about the idea. They decided to develop a program that would teach Children's Storefront students that healthy eating could be fun.

Slow Food representatives met with the principal and the Parent-Teacher Association of Children's Storefront. From that meeting Harvest Time in Harlem was born. Third and fourth graders learn not only about food and nutrition, but how to cook. Math, creative writing, vocabulary, history, geography and culture are incorporated into the lessons.

Asano teaches the classes, which meet one Friday every month. Harvest Time in Harlem is an extracurricular activity at Children's Storefront, so Asano and the students meet after school, usually from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. About 20 students chose the program as their extracurricular activity.

A handful of volunteers are on hand when Asano teaches the classes, and she sometimes enlists their help. "We

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invite chefs and professionals in the (food) industry to the classroom,” Asano said. Last December, the youngsters heard from Christopher Nicolson, a salmon fisherman from Alaska.

“We wanted to introduce the students to salmon and to fish,” Asano said. “Some students were aware of the fish and that it was good for you, as opposed to the meat. We’re very conscious of providing healthy meals and alternative recipes for the students.” After that lesson, one girl’s mother told Asano that her daughter asked that salmon be served at their next meal.

In January Elizabeth Fassberg, a nutritionist, taught the children about calories, vitamins and the sodium content and sugar content in processed foods. When they finished that exercise, Fassberg had the students check the ingredients listed on the packages of selected snacks and foods.

Once they learned those lessons about the healthy benefits of salmon and other fish and why they should be leery of some processed foods, it was on to February, the month of St. Valentine’s Day and, of course, chocolate.

When the students showed up one day early that month at Edo’s Kitchen, the school’s cafeteria which is located in the basement of one of three buildings on 129th Street that houses the Children’s Storefront, they found snacks of whole wheat pita, apples, pears and hummus – and a table full of chocolate.

“We’re going to teach them where chocolate comes from,” said Tina Casaceli, who along with Toni Dickinson, were chefs from the French Culinary Institute. “We’re going to teach them about the harvest and manufacturing of chocolate.

There would be a hands-on — or rather, taste-buds-on — learning experience for the children as well, Dickerson said.

“We’re going to teach them what (chocolate) looks and tastes like from its raw state to its processed state,” she explained. “We’re going to teach them that chocolate is good for you, in moderation, and that it doesn’t have to be gooey caramel.”

As the students chatted, munched or huddled over the table as Casaceli and Dickinson told them about things like cacao nibs and cocoa butter, Asano raised a hand. That was the signal to the children to take their seats. The lesson was about to begin.

“How many people know where chocolate comes from?” Dickinson asked.

“Cocoa beans,” one of them correctly answered. Dickinson then explained why cocoa beans can only grow in places 20 degrees north or 20 degrees south of the equator. The climate isn’t suitable anywhere else.

“The pods the cocoa beans are in grow on trees,” she explained. “They grow in the shade and are picked by hand. They’re hand-picked because the pickers have to know when they’re ripe.”

On a table the chefs had some cacao nibs, cocoa powder, cocoa butter, bittersweet chocolate, semi-sweet chocolate, white chocolate and chocolate chips on paper plates. They let students taste each. Most of them scrunched up their noses after discovering how bitter cocoa powder tasted.

But after Casaceli and Dickinson whipped up a concoction of bittersweet chocolate and semi-sweet chocolate for them to dip dried fruit into, those scrunched-up noses disappeared. Ezekiel Spencer, a 9-year-old third grader, proudly displayed a dried pineapple he had dipped in the chocolate.

“I’m gonna dip it again!” Ezekiel announced with glee. When reminded that another dipping would result in quite a bit of chocolate, Ezekiel just grinned.

“That’s the point!” he said, beaming.

The combination of bittersweet and semi-sweet chocolate was, Dickinson said, not a bad choice when it comes to health. “A dark chocolate is the best chocolate to eat,” Dickinson

explained. “It has less sugar. It has less milk solid.”

And when a piece of dried fruit is dipped in it, the dark chocolate is even better than a Snickers bar, if you believe Ezekiel’s verdict.

“The chocolate pineapple was better than any chocolate thing I have ever tasted,” Ezekiel said. “The Snickers bar is not as good.”



Students absorb the glories of fresh produce.

Physical education: The missing ingredient for curbing black kids' obesity

By Kayce T. Ataiyero

In California, the epidemic level of obesity among black adults is mirrored in the health status of their children.

The lack of access to nutrition and athletic resources, high exposure to



Dr. Toni Yancey.

junk food advertising and cultural attitudes have contributed to a growing number of black kids being overweight in the Golden Gate State.

But while the environment in their neighborhoods and in their homes play a significant role in the health habits these children adopt, Dr. Toni Yancey thinks one key component is overlooked far too often: physical education in schools.

Yancey, co-director of The Center to Eliminate Health Disparities at the UCLA School of Public Health, said schools are the first line of defense in combating the obesity epidemic. As such, the center has partnered with the Professional Athletes Council – an organization co-founded by the Dallas Mavericks' Jerry Stackhouse and the Atlanta Falcons' Allen Rossum – to promote greater physical activity in schools.

“What we found that is not surprising to many people is that recess has been pretty much decimated by all the focus on standardized testing and No Child Left Behind,” Yancey said. “Therefore, the level of physical education and physical activity in schools is really low.”

Even in cases where recess is provided, resources are lacking, she said. “Our study found that most of the elementary schools do not have full time PE specialists,” Yancey said.

“Most of the PE is not being done by a PE teacher and you can imagine what an average, 50-year-old, overweight, sedentary woman is going to do with 50 kids.”

The study, which the center released in January, is called “Failing Fitness: Physical Activity and Physical Education in Schools.” It examined the current state of physical activity and physical education in a statewide sample of 77 California schools.

What emerges from this study is a portrait of a physical education system in the state's K-12 public schools that is deficient in both quantity and quality.

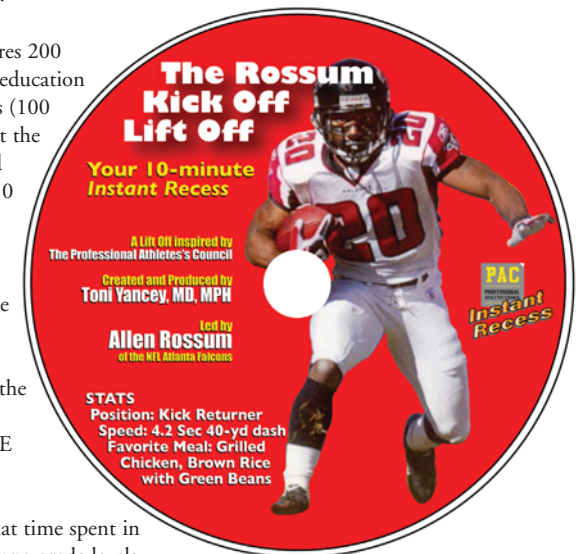
California law requires 200 minutes of physical education every 10 school days (100 minutes per week) at the elementary level and 400 minutes every 10 days (200 minutes per week) in secondary schools. But, according to the report, fewer than half of California school districts met the state mandated elementary school PE requirement.

The report found that time spent in PE varies widely among grade levels. Elementary schools fall short – by

32 minutes on average – of the state mandated PE requirements. Most of the schools fall below this minimum, with some schools offering as little as 70 minutes every 10 days.

Most middle and high schools are meeting the required 400 minutes every 10 days, but some offer only 300 or 350 minutes. But still too many students spend most of the time being sedentary.

According to the report, on average, only four minutes of every half hour of PE in California schools includes vigorous activity. Even when classes offer activities such as soccer or softball, students spend the majority



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of class time standing while roll is taken or awaiting their turn to play.

While the state of physical education is discouraging across all income brackets, students in lower income schools spend less time being active in PE, the study found. Students in more affluent schools spend 20 percent more PE time engaged in moderate to vigorous activity than students in low income schools.

The report suggests that better access to resources translates to better opportunities for physical education. That's where Instant Recess comes in. The public-private partnership between the center and the athletes' council aims to level the playing field.

Instant Recess is an awareness initiative that encourages public schools to increase the level of physical activity among students. The centerpiece of the program is a CD/DVD component that incorporates simple and enjoyable participatory physical activity opportunities. These "Lift Offs" are brief, structured exercise bouts involving simple aerobic/resistance movements to music.

Yancey said the program will make PE easier for schools that often don't have the personnel or resources to do it properly. It will also eliminate some

of the hurdles created by large class sizes, she said.

"Each of the athletes is going to be producing a CD and DVD that can be popped right into the player by the teacher," she said.

The program seeks to popularize the exercise model as a means of reintegrating physical activity into the school routine. The goal is to improve the learning environment of schools and after-school programs by increasing fitness, attention span, self-esteem and positive body image and decreasing negative health indicators and disruptive behavior – particularly among boys.

The Instant Recess CD and DVD – which should be complete by the end of April, 2007 – will be rolled out to 2,200 California schools. The program will reach more than 1 million students.

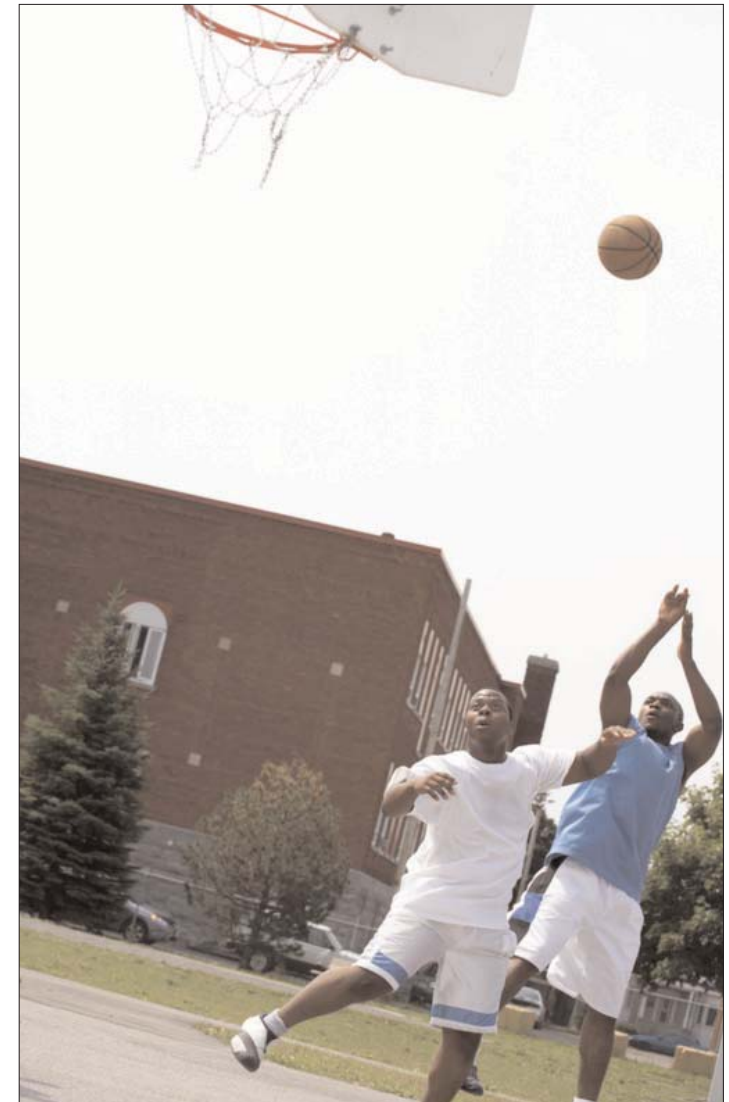
Yancey said the project is creating a statewide model for combating childhood obesity. It focuses on 11 regions throughout California, the most populous of those areas are Oakland, Los Angeles and San Diego. Those also happen to be areas with heavy concentrations of blacks and Latinos, who have traditionally had the highest rates of childhood obesity.

"It is a school system-wide problem," Yancey said "But of course almost every problem that's out there disproportionately affects lower socioeconomic schools and communities," Yancey said.

California's urban areas have been hit especially hard by high rates of youth obesity, Yancey said. "I think the problems are most acute in the inner city," Yancey said. "The problems are more concentrated in the higher population centers."

In addition to the schools campaign, Instant Recess will also be reaching out to people at sporting and other community events to get the word out about getting in shape. Yancey said that program's overarching goal is to make a sedentary lifestyle unacceptable.

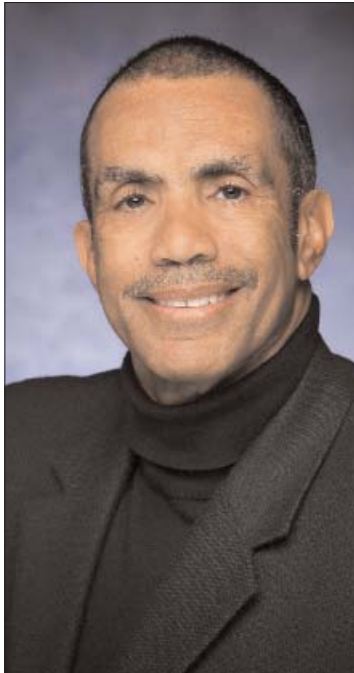
"Physical education is a very, very important issue," she said. "If children can get a good amount of their physical activity at school that is a huge step toward getting them in the kind of habits they can continue for a lifetime."



Getting into the fitness game.

AFTERWORD

Kenneth Bentley



Last month, Nestlé USA announced the selection of the winners of our annual Very Best in Youth award. These youngsters, who were chosen in a nationwide competition for their outstanding academics and community service, are the most recent example of our great interest in the young people of this nation.

Just as we are interested in recognizing the achievements of young Americans, we also are concerned about their well being. That's why we're proud to have underwritten the production of this reporting project, "Black childhood obesity: What's behind it, how to beat it."

Nestlé USA has long had an interest in good nutrition. For more than a quarter century, the Nestlé Nutrition Institute has conducted workshops around the world to foster a better understanding of the nutritional needs of infants and their families.

This reporting project, which explores the far-reaching impact of obesity among black youngsters, is a natural extension of that effort.

Our support of this work is not just good corporate citizenship; it is a reflection of our belief that a healthy nation is good business. We have a stake in the wellness of the people of this country, especially those who are most endangered by poverty and lack of access to opportunity.

We're very proud of the efforts we make to honor the wonderful achievements of the young people recognized in our Best in Youth program – and we are equally proud of our support of this report's attempt to focus national attention on a serious health problem that afflicts millions of black youngsters.

In both of these programs, we hope that what we have done helps to enrich this nation's most important commodity – our children.

Kenneth Bentley
Vice President of Community Affairs/Educational Programs
Nestlé USA



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