IN A NATIONAL CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS MARKED BY CHILDREN INTERRUPTING VIDEO GAME-PLAYING ONLY TO DOWN BIGGIE-SIZE FAST-FOOD MEALS, FOUNDATIONS ARE NOW WEIGHING IN. LAST YEAR, THE ENDOWMENTS’ CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES PROGRAM BEGAN PLANNING STRATEGIES THAT ADDRESS THE TOUGHEST CHALLENGE: CHANGING LIFESTYLES IN THE YOUNG. 

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On Sept. 2 of last year, Rooney Middle School went cold turkey. Students lining up for such lunchtime staples as Pittsburgh-style french fries with hot cheese sauce, meat nachos and cartons of sugary iced tea instead found choices like fresh strawberries, low-fat milk and baked chips. Menu items aimed for less than 100 calories from fat per serving.

The immediate response among the Pittsburgh school’s 322 students: loud complaints, as might be expected on almost any school topic by a group of pre-teens, but no mutiny. When pressed, the students now admit that their new options are a lot healthier than the old. Rooney, a public school on the city’s North Side, has become a laboratory for promoting better choices—at lunchtime, in the gym and at home—to improve nutrition and health. Down the hall from the cafeteria, boot-camp calisthenics are being traded for mini-trampolines and jump ropes in the gym, and pedometers are replacing push-ups.

The aim of several new programs led by The Heinz Endowments and several other foundations in western Pennsylvania is to get kids to grow up without growing out. Around Pittsburgh, embarrassed as the ninth-fattest city in the nation last year, 32 percent of children are now considered overweight, and more than 4 percent are at risk for type 2 diabetes. Minorities and low-income kids are disproportionately vulnerable.

Type 2 diabetes was formerly tagged “adult-onset,” since so few children developed the disease. Now its signs may appear in those in their late teens who are overweight. With added pounds also come higher risks for high blood pressure, high cholesterol and stroke. Higher risks of asthma, cancer, orthopedic problems and depression also accompany extra weight.

It’s a health epidemic that can’t be addressed in hospitals, yet costs the system millions of dollars. More than 80 percent of overweight kids carry those extra pounds into adulthood. As they do, the regional costs for treating the results of obesity are soaring. Local insurer Highmark estimates a price tag of $306 million for 2002 alone.
“If you want to know why health care costs are skyrocketing, look at the cost of treating diabetics compared to non-diabetics,” says U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, who expresses alarm at the evidence linking obesity to diabetes. “We have to teach kids to get a little bit of exercise and eat right.”

The Endowments is stepping up. Two recent local grants, to Girls on the Run and Healthy Class 2010, aim to fill Murtha’s national prescription. The Endowments has paired that $350,000 (another $100,000 grant was approved in May) with support for a statewide strategy targeting school- and restaurant-menu choices. The $80,000 grant supports Pennsylvania efforts by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the national health and nutrition advocacy group. The joint efforts push the Endowments to the front lines of the battle against childhood obesity.

For Carmen Anderson of the Endowments’ Children, Youth & Families Program, the call to combat came in one blunt factoid presented at a human services briefing: unless the trend is reversed, the current kindergarten-through-12th-grade students may be the first not to live longer than their parents.

“That was the defining moment,” says Anderson, the program officer developing grantmaking to address the crisis. “The statistics are alarming. The adult obesity rate has doubled over the past 20 years, but the prevalence in children has nearly tripled.”

For Dr. Stephen Thomas, director of the Center for Minority Health at the University of Pittsburgh, early action is key. “Targeting kids who are not obese,” he says. “That’s the best way to prevent obesity.” Prevention has become a national campaign. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has made halting childhood obesity by 2015 a top priority and has invested $80 million nationally to promote healthy foods and opportunities for recreation (see “Fresh Thinking,” page 36).

Like other national health initiatives, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is stepping down to the local level.

“When you’re facing an intractable problem like obesity in large numbers of children, you address it through concentric circles,” says the Endowments’ Marge Petruska, director of Children, Youth & Families. “We look first at individuals, then families, then communities to ask, what are the forces preventing wellness? We’ve done it successfully in dealing with gang violence and infant mortality and lack of early childhood programs. But changing ingrained patterns of behavior in children is very tough.”

Anderson concurs. “We’ve always approached helping families holistically. But when we hear that physical education, especially for young children, is being pushed out of schools, then this is a much bigger issue. It’s important that we modify our strategy to act faster.”

Pittsburgh foundations are not alone in their concern about the school-age population. The percentage of overweight children and adults has accelerated so dramatically worldwide that the problem is now being called “globesity.” The rise of junk food and sedentary lifestyles—what Silvia Arslanian, director of the Pediatric Center for Weight Management and Wellness at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, cites from other sources as the “Coca-Colonization” of the world—has communities searching for models to address a public health crisis.

The regional programs supported by the Endowments adopt elements of successful pilots elsewhere, supporting them with research conducted here by the National Institutes of Health and the federal Centers for Disease Control. The Endowments also has joined a wider regional effort fusing philanthropy into education, primary care and research to fight the problem.

The good news is that no starvation diets or triathlons are required. One study of young overweight girls showed that as little as an extra hour of activity a week reduced their body mass index, a measurement of body fat based on height and weight. Such a simple finding has led to a natural focus on revving up the content of school physical education—a movement one local gym teacher describes as “No Children Left on Their Behinds”—as well as frequency.

“There was a time when gym class reflected a military mentality. We were doing push-ups and long runs,” recalls Sarah Jameela Martin, who has led the introduction of a cooler, more lighthearted version of physical education and health instruction in city schools. At the elementary level, the ambitious
The Endowments’ anti-obesity programs for children in Pittsburgh come out of commissioned national research studies and interviews with professionals who interact with at-risk children. In physical education classes at Arthur J. Rooney Middle School, students Rebecca Searight, left, and Brandon Lee, above, are attracted to activities far removed from push-ups and forced track runs. Below left: Rooney student Zachary Buggle makes a healthier food choice in the school cafeteria as part of the Healthy Class 2010 Campaign. The goal: to turn middle-schoolers into nutritionally aware and physically active young adults by high school graduation. Below right: Bellevue Elementary students Chelsea Dungan, left, and Danielle D’Amico participate in a “Girls on the Run” session.
new curriculum, funded by Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, combines two winning programs. San Diego’s Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids complements nutrition units known as Food Re-education for Elementary School Health, developed by the Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center. The San Diego program also has been introduced in middle schools and is expanding into high schools through Highmark and Pittsburgh’s Grable Foundation. “Our goal is getting kids active, participating and moving for the maximum amount of time,” stresses Martin. “We need them to understand that they must be active seven days a week—not just once a week in gym class.”

The Healthy Class 2010 campaign developed by the Center for Minority Health in 2003 reinforces that message with city middle-schoolers. The six-year initiative, officially titled “Billions of Steps for Healthy Students: the Class of 2010,” aims to transform pre-teens into physically active, nutritionally aware adults by high school graduation.

“I pack a lunch,” says Zachary Bugey, a freckled seventh-grader and a member of the cross-country team. “No red meat,” says classmate Julia Johnson, who now lifts weights at home with her G.I. uncle. “I don’t biggie-size” fast food meals, adds eighth-grader Brandon Lee.

Rooney got valuable reinforcement for the Healthy Class program last fall, when it became one of seven national research centers for a National Institutes of Health program examining the role of activity in reducing insulin levels.

“There’s evidence that suggests that when there’s a sustained level of moderately vigorous physical activity—getting kids’ heart rates to 140 beats per minute—insulin levels decrease,” says Dr. Beth Venditti, a co-investigator for the project at the University of Pittsburgh and Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic. Though she says early results show that “we did not get heart rates as high as we would have liked to have seen,” some benefits of the program will last. Funding through the National Institutes of Health gave Rooney a $14,000 windfall of equipment that adult health club members would envy: stair steppers, mini-trampolines, heart rate monitors, jump ropes and cart-loads of fresh basketballs.

While that program provides equal equipment access for boys and girls, another program specifically directed at getting girls moving is Girls On the Run, an after-school activity that teaches self-respect and body awareness to third-through-fifth-graders. First developed in Charlotte in 1996, the program was adopted by Magee-Womens Hospital, which runs spring and summer camp sessions at 17 sites in western Pennsylvania. At Cornell Intermediate School in McKeesport, it’s so popular that third-year enrollment has been capped at 100 students. The Endowments’ support gives scholarships to more than half the Cornell participants.

With no other recreation activities for her students, Cornell teacher Mary Ann LaFever sees the program as a

FRESH THINKING

As the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation demonstrates through its Active Living by Design program, now under way in 25 communities, access to sidewalks, green space and public transportation keeps communities healthy. The Endowments’ programs in civic design and environment play a role in nutrition and activity at the local level.

In promoting sustainable urban design, a hallmark of its Environment and Arts & Culture Programs, the Endowments supports parks, trails and water recreation, particularly through the Riverlife Task Force, to benefit users of all ages.

(While Pittsburgh ranks ninth nationally in terms of obesity, it was also ranked as the ninth-healthiest city, mainly for its abundant public parks.) For Pittsburgh Public Schools, Carnegie Mellon University is developing a geographic information system that maps recreation opportunities within a half-mile of schools.

A recent grant to Grow Pittsburgh, a community gardens project from the Endowments’ Environment Program, will provide locally grown produce. It’s expected to particularly benefit low-income communities with limited access to grocery stores and farmers markets, meshing with new initiatives in environmental health.
low-key inducement to learn about nutrition, teamwork and good health. Her students view it differently.

“No boys,” grins Lynette Reilly, an apple-cheeked sixth-grader who’ll join the more sophisticated Girls on Track program this spring. “No homework. And lots of new friends.” For 10 weeks each spring, girls progress from team walks to longer runs, interspersed with talks about body image, food choice and friendships. Families—even brothers—are invited to join the girls and teachers at the program’s final three-kilometer event.

“We have a lot of kids being raised by grandparents, so there’s not a lot of physical activity at home,” explains LaFever, who has recruited other Cornell teachers to coach the program. “Our kids have a gym class every seventh school day.”

Cornell’s schedule is not unusual. Most Pennsylvania schools allot only 30 minutes a week to gym. While the state mandates that physical education must be taught each year, it doesn’t specify class frequency. A 2002 study showed that only 1 percent of state elementary schools met national guidelines for 150 minutes of physical education each week. Nationally, only 8 percent of schools hit that mark.

The Minority Health Center’s Thomas says that making youngsters enthusiastic about activity begins with extending the invitation.

“It’s wrong to assume that kids want to be couch potatoes. When you give them the right environment, they love [being active]. We’ve shortchanged them by making assumptions. When they get an opportunity to do the right thing, most of the time they do it.”

School districts have for decades supplemented bland basics with à la carte snacks and commercial vending machine treats. Now there’s an attempt to wean both students and schools from those extras. Some schools, like Rooney, have eliminated vending machines completely, a decision that Congressman Murtha calls “appropriate.”

But if students aren’t tempted by lunch-line munchies, school districts lose money. Rooney saw an immediate loss of $80 a day in its food revenues when it switched to a healthier menu. “We found that when you [offer] healthier choices, it will cost the schools more money,” says district food service supervisor Danny Seymour.

The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act signed by President Bush last year dictates writing wellness policies to govern foods sold on school campuses, a fresh-produce pilot program (through which Rooney and other city schools now receive healthy extras like strawberries) and programs to promote physical activity, along with nutrition.

Some critics blame students’ tastes on food advertisers that bombard kids with messages for junk food. The Center for Science in the Public Interest estimates that marketing budgets for foods aimed at children have risen from $7 billion to $15 billion in the past decade, embedded in television programs, movies and other product placements.

The Endowments supports a Center for Science campaign in Pennsylvania: pushing schools and fast food restaurants to post nutrition content for menu items. The policy change would reinforce foundations’ goals for changes in local schools, but the Endowments also is advocating state-level involvement.

That interest bolsters the efforts of coalitions such as Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Advocacy, which is readying background for schools to begin a statewide growth screening program in September. School nurses will chart height and weight measurements for all children, computing a body mass index that districts will report to parents.

The effort brings reminders of past reports to parents that their children were overweight. Those met with the kind of outraged howls heard in the Rooney lunchroom. Districts like North Allegheny in suburban Pittsburgh quickly learned a lesson: if a school district chooses to tell parents its findings, it had better do so very carefully.

“Information has to be presented like a gift,” says the Pittsburgh Schools’ Martin. “You have to prepare parents: ‘This is what we’re doing. This is why.’ ” The Endowments’ Petruska sees a role for foundations, using grant money to deliver important baseline information on students to parents and educators, then using incentives to foster change in institutional systems like schools.

“Frankly, I don’t care if people find some of this hard to hear and some of the necessary changes difficult to make,” she says. “We’re talking about the health of our children here and, as they go, so will go the well-being of our society.”