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Schools need to get more active in child obesity battle

It's no secret that childhood obesity is a major problem in the United States.

With a McDonald's, Burger King or Wendy's on just about every street corner, America's children are being super-sized. Add in the fact children are spending more time watching television, in front of a computer, playing video games or listening to music and it's not difficult to see that children aren't spending enough time exercising.

According to the 2007-2008 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, an estimated 17 percent of children and adolescents ages 2-19 years are obese. The report reveals that among preschool age children 2-5 years of age, obesity increased from 5 to 10.4 percent between 1976-1980 and 2007-2008 and from 6.5 to 19.6 percent among 6-11-year-olds.

During the same time period, obesity increased from 5 to 18.1 percent among adolescents aged 12-19. To combat the ongoing growth of childhood obesity, President Obama issued a Presidential Memorandum establishing a task force to try and solve the problem within a generation.

Many were thrilled that the federal government had decided to take action against the alarming rate of childhood obesity, but many were left to wonder what took so long.

With the task force's deadline approaching, I am among those eager to see the recommendations they propose.

While the responsibility of raising children who lead healthy lifestyles ultimately falls on parents, given the amount of time children spend in school, it is crucial to have schools on board as partners in reducing the level of childhood obesity in the United States. Schools must do a

better job in educating children about nutrition and exercise.

Then, these same schools must practice what they preach by offering a lunch menu that promotes a well-balanced, nutritional diet and by providing an opportunity for children to get the daily exercise they need to stay fit. No more chicken nuggets.

No more vending machines with chocolate bars and other sweets. No more soft drinks.

Recent trends indicate that schools are increasingly eliminating vending machines in their schools and doing a better job of offering nutritional foods on their menu, but there is still a long way to go.

Over the past three months, members of the "Let's Move" campaign have been meeting with stakeholders across the country.

Along with speaking to primary and secondary school officials, I would hope that they are meeting with early educators as well. Just as with reading and

writing, eating properly and exercising regularly are learned behaviors.

Research shows that children who participate in early education activities prior to entering kindergarten perform better academically.

For that reason, wouldn't it be beneficial to introduce the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle as early as possible to enable young children to develop sound eating and exercising habits?

I'm pleased to see the federal government finally taking action to reduce childhood obesity. I would take greater pleasure in seeing schools and preschools do more on their own to initiate a change in how children eat and exercise.

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GUEST OPINION



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