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Health and Wellness: Identifying the Role of the School

Statistics indicate that there is a mounting health crisis in America. As a nation, we are becoming more obese and experiencing an increase in health problems associated with obesity. When our nation encounters a challenge, there is a historical tendency to look to our nation's schools to meet the challenge.

Some choose to blame the schools with statements like, "People are fat because kids are fat. Kids are fat because the schools are filling them up with soda pop!" Please note that never in the 25 year history of Salem Schools, have soda machines been routinely available for students.

Others look to our schools under the assumption that our education system can fix all social ills. Indeed, schools have been a vital means to help desegregate society, feed the economically disadvantaged, screen for health-related needs, and provide character education, but all of these required a multi-faceted approach to problem solving and considerable resources.

Many look to the schools because, unlike most human behavior, schools can be regulated and controlled. Requiring adults to be physically fit or expecting parents to be more engaged in the lives of their children would be very difficult to legislate and likely unpopular with voters. Legislating new requirements for schools, however, provides a politically motivated opportunity to address a social challenge. But, when you consider the fact that school lunches only account for 16% of the meals a student will eat in a year, focusing too much on school lunch programs is a disservice to the discussion about childhood obesity.

The requirements that regulate school lunch programs at the federal and state level, which are too numerous and too complex for the purposes of this column, place age/grade specific limits on the amount of fat as a percentage of total calories, require low cholesterol and sodium, and mandate whole grains, vegetable, and fruits. Persons interested in the federal regulations for school lunch programs can access information online (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/>) including the complete regulations (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/regulations/7CFR210.pdf>).

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, school menus are reviewed periodically and subjected to a complete nutritional analysis every five years. Locally, Salem City Schools contract with a nutritionist who uses the federal Enhanced Food-based Menu Planning Approach to prepare menu recommendations. We reconcile the federal and state requirements with what our parents expect and what students will actually eat with Cafeteria Advisory Committees at each building. School cafeteria operations are *not* profit-making endeavors. They try to break even, but doing so is only possible when food choices are appealing to young

people. Given the ever-increasing regulations, rapidly-changing student preferences, and higher food costs, breaking even at \$1.80-\$2 per student lunch is a challenge.

Teaching and learning are where schools make their greatest contribution to our nation's challenges and we are doing more now in the areas of fitness and nutrition than ever before. There are Standards of Learning for Health and Physical Education just as there are for all content areas. Currently, our programs place greater emphasis on wellness, providing focused health instruction and introducing students to more individual fitness activities in physical education.

The recent renovation of Andrew Lewis Middle School featured a fully equipped fitness room and in the coming year our H/PE teachers will be evaluating new technologies available to promote individual fitness. Also in 2008-2009, each of our schools will be participating in the Governor's Nutrition and Physical Activity Scorecard as a means to further increase awareness and school-based activities related to nutrition and physical activity.

Just as school lunches account for only a small portion of a student's meals, the forces influencing the eating habits of our children are formidable. I recently noticed a billboard advertising, "Two, double bacon-cheddar cheeseburgers for \$3...goes great with bacon-cheddar cheese fries." This meal, paired with a soft drink, would provide a normal amount of calories for an entire day. We need to learn principles of good nutrition and pass them along to our children.

As Superintendent, I am responsible for supporting our nutrition programs and guiding the development of our instructional programs, but as a parent I am responsible for helping my children make good choices. I have the responsibility to set expectations and limits for my children as to how often they can purchase "extras" *and* the opportunity to call my child's cafeteria manager and request a report of my child's purchases from the cafeteria debit system to follow up on my expectations. I cannot and should not allow over dependence on the schools to relieve me of my parental responsibility.

I frequently eat in the schools knowing that the food is good, the nutrition is balanced, the portions and prices are reasonable, and that it is prepared and served with care by good people. Parents with questions about cafeteria services in their child's school are encouraged to contact their child's cafeteria manager, principal, or Assistant Superintendent, Michael A. Bryant. I relied heavily on Mr. Bryant for the information in this column and I trust him with administering the food service program that serves my own children.