

2004-2005 MARIN COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

Food for Thought: Efforts to Counter Youth Obesity

June 22, 2005

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SUMMARY

Many recent media reports have focused on the topic of obesity. The Grand Jury was particularly concerned with the issue of obesity in our children and related health problems.

We found that we are not alone in this concern. There are many excellent initiatives in Marin to address youth obesity and related challenges. Particularly noteworthy are the efforts of the Healthy Marin Partnership Leadership Group. Their recommendations on what it would take to reduce overweight and obesity should serve as guidelines for the entire Marin community.

While much is being done, there are opportunities to expand our efforts to benefit the current and future health of our children. The Grand Jury encourages the Marin County Office of Education and the Marin County Health and Human Services Department to promote the strategies recommended by the Healthy Marin Partnership Leadership Group. In addition, these two organizations are also encouraged to review and promote the most promising health and nutrition programs currently in practice in Marin's schools.

OBJECTIVE AND APPROACH

The Grand Jury sought to provide a brief review of how some local public schools and other agencies are responding to the challenges of youth obesity. We interviewed professionals across the county, including school administrators, educators, nutritionists, and elected officials. Members of the jury also attended conferences and visited schools to learn what they were doing concerning nutrition. We also reviewed numerous documents/websites (see References). We sought to identify examples of "best practices" within the county that could be further assessed, expanded when appropriate, and/or serve as models for other schools/districts within the county.

BACKGROUND

After reading in the New York Times that New York children "have become almost as supersized as an order of fries" (Haberman), the Grand Jury was concerned about the local spreading of this rapidly developing problem. In California, including Marin, at least one-fourth of our children are overweight or obese (Meredith).

Recognizing this challenge statewide, the California State Legislature passed various bills dealing with nutrition education, stating that proper nutrition for children is a matter of the highest priority. In Education Code Sec. 8996b, the Legislature defined nutrition education as "a planned sequential instructional program that provides knowledge and teaches skills to help pupils adopt and maintain lifelong healthy eating patterns." This legislation encourages schools to inform students about healthy eating and to offer programs for teachers-in-training with health instruction and nutrition education.

There are indications that much is being done in Marin County to provide nutritious school meals and to help deter obesity in children. Still, "Thirty-four percent of children ages two to 17... are overweight" (Healthy Marin Partnership Leadership Group). While many of the people

in this county who are engaged in children’s services are aware of youth obesity and are using numerous programs to counter it, more can be done.

DISCUSSION

Efforts to Raise Awareness of the Challenges

Particularly outstanding in the effort to raise awareness and offer solutions for youth obesity is “*Pathways to Progress: Laying the Foundations for a Healthier Marin, 2005 Community Needs Assessment and Plan.*” This publication of the Healthy Marin Partnership Leadership Group (www.healthymarin.org) listed “Overweight and Obesity” as its first issue. In this report, a summary of contributing causes includes:

- Lack of policies that restrict the marketing of “junk food” to children
- Limited access to healthy, affordable, quality foods
- School environments that do not routinely encourage healthy foods and physical activity
- Increased television, computer, and video use resulting in decreased physical activity
- Lack of awareness and education

“Pathways to Progress” summarizes accomplishments in addressing these issues in Marin to date, and details recommendations for the immediate future. In addition, it lists seven specific strategies and associated activities to attack the problem, as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1 What Would It Take To Reduce Overweight and Obesity?*

Strategies	Activities
Influencing Policy And Legislation	Advocate and support policies that restrict the availability, accessibility, placement, promotion, and discounted pricing of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. Advocate for policies that encourage sound nutrition, physical activity and education programs throughout county school districts and at pre-schools and colleges.
Mobilizing Neighborhoods and Communities	Mobilize communities to advocate for programs and policies that are effective in reducing obesity, overweight, and disordered eating.
Changing Organizational Practices	Implement policies and procedures within organizations and groups that serve children and their parents, as well as within businesses – such as food vendors, markets, and restaurants – that sell food and beverages to children, parents, and schools.
Fostering Coalitions and Networks	Engage the community and other stakeholders in identifying key community issues and in developing a strategic plan for intervention and solutions.
Educating Providers	Offer training and technical assistance to providers for educating the public about healthy eating, prevention of obesity and disordered eating, and physical activity.
Promoting Community Education	Develop and support media campaigns that educate the community about healthy eating and physical activity, and eliminate the environmental barriers that prevent these healthy lifestyle behaviors.
Strengthening Individual Knowledge and Skills	Provide information and training to youth, parents, teachers, school and public health nurses, community providers, food and beverage vendors, health professionals, and other community partners on how to promote healthy eating, physical activity and school and community policies that encourage these behaviors.

*From “Pathways to Progress: Laying the Foundations for a Healthier Marin,” 2005 Community Needs Assessment and Plan, page 17

Nationally, efforts to raise awareness of this issue include the National School Lunch Program (Public Law 108-265), that was recently amended and signed into law on June 30, 2004. It recommends that children learn about the nutrition of the meals they are being served. Included in the program is The Healthy School Meals Resource System, providing reading material from the Department of Agriculture for school food service personnel.

Locally, one program that contributed to awareness was “The Ninth Annual Peer Summit,” held at the Marin Civic Center in November 2004 for Marin middle school students and adult advisors. Students attended workshops, heard nutrition experts, and participated in activities promoting healthy lifestyles. For instance, at the Planet Health workshop, eighth graders were given copies of the Food Guide Pyramid and asked to pack a healthy lunch bag with choices from the food groups. During the Summit, students’ giveaways included nutritious snacks, juices, foods, and other health-related gifts.

One organization involved in preparing, helping, and leading Marin youth is the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI). With representatives from the school-age population within every school district, this, the oldest youth advocacy group in the country, aims to bring together groups of young people and adults interested in speaking for "positive social change." One YLI committee goes to Sacramento to work on legislation affecting California's young people. The YLI was concerned about how the youth obesity epidemic is affecting Marin County. A committee worked with the Nutrition/Wellness Program of the Marin County Division of Public Health, creating a survey that covered all of Marin's public school population to examine students' food choices and eating patterns. Results show students want "to be part of changing food options at their schools."

It has been observed that when youth are involved in school food planning, they become more interested in the importance of their health and less likely to be “nutritionally clueless nibblers” (ADA - American Dietetic Association). Students want well-functioning minds and bodies (YLI School Nutrition Survey).

As part of the Environmental Education Council of Marin, the mission of the Marin Food Systems Project is another example of developing awareness of the “connection between a healthy diet and a student’s ability to learn effectively.” Working with over thirty schools, this project promotes school gardens, field trips to working farms to learn about Marin agriculture, professional development training, and establishment of School Nutritional Advisory Councils.

Another youth advocacy group is Beyond Hunger Inc., established over ten years ago to help people become comfortable with their body image. Beyond Hunger's research shows eating habits in Marin affect children and adolescents of all ethnicities and classes. Beyond Hunger set up Body Image Awareness programs for eighth graders, making school presentations that train youth to "develop a positive and healthy relationship with their body, food, and selves." When they complete the program, eighth graders mentor fifth graders about eating awareness and nutrition.

Efforts to Teach about Farming in Marin

The Grand Jury found numerous efforts within the County to expose children to the production of healthy foods. “*Pathways to Progress*” observes that “Limited access to healthy, affordable,

quality foods results in low daily consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and high consumption of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods, including sodas and fast foods.” Programs that familiarize students with production of healthy foods may help encourage healthier eating habits.

Much of Marin County is permanently preserved for agricultural use through the Marin Agricultural Land Trust. This rich environmental resource is unknown to many students. The Environmental Education Council of Marin “grew out of concern about student lack of connection with local agriculture, student lack of agricultural literacy, and the absence of locally grown nutritious foods in Marin County schools.” When students of all ages study ecology, visit farms, and grow their own produce, their informed awareness of the food they eat is “enthusiastic and measurable” (Marin Agricultural and Education Alliance).

The Marin Agriculture and Education Alliance and the Farm Field Study Program are “a collaborative of agriculture and education agencies working together to promote agricultural literacy for a sustainable food system.” Since 1998, they have coordinated soil science studies, taught history and ecology of Marin County, emphasized state and district adherence to nutrition standards, promoted appreciation of farm work, and developed projects for fourth and fifth graders on Marin agriculture. Teachers of all grade levels can receive in-service credit at the Marin Summer Agricultural Institute for attending three-day summer seminars. They visit local farms and then take their students on field trips to the farms and local farmers markets.

Some schools are located in parts of Marin County near working farms and even seem to be an extension of these farms, such as the Lagunitas School District, located in the San Geronimo Valley. District offices and kindergarten through eighth grade classroom buildings are clustered in the valley near the San Geronimo Community Center. Every class has its own garden and is involved in nutrition and agriculture studies. The Upper School students voted to remove the high-sugar drinks machine and are deciding what should replace it.

Efforts to Improve the Nutrition of Meals Served in Our Public Schools

Two years ago Novato Unified School District hired a nutritionist to improve food service in its schools. Now, some other Marin County school districts have contracted with Novato Unified School District Food Service to provide them with healthy breakfasts and lunches. This food service has gradually expanded its arrangements with local farmers and in the past year has increased its lunch selections, such as fresh vegetable salads and fresh fruits for all schools it serves. Once each week, participating elementary schools have a salad bar organized around a theme appealing to children. The Novato Unified School District has expressed interest in further expanding its contract services.

CONCLUSIONS

Much is being done in Marin County to counter obesity in children. Many people in this county who are engaged in children’s services are aware of the youth obesity epidemic. When the Grand Jury began this review, we had no idea how many schools and local organizations were working so hard to promote, maintain, and improve health. But, of course, more can be done.

The Grand Jury recognizes that many people need to engage in helping children eat nutritiously in order to combat obesity. This should involve parents, schools, communities, health organizations, and government (Stein).

The Grand Jury believes the many, on-going excellent efforts to promote strong, healthy children in Marin should be further assessed and the best practices shared.

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