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A \$500M recipe for confronting obesity in kids

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which has pledged an unprecedented \$500 million to combat childhood obesity, is attempting to do nothing less than change a world where kids drink 32-ounce sodas, eat fast-food dinners and watch too much television.

The Princeton-based foundation plans to spread its message nationwide, but especially in low-income areas, where the problem of childhood obesity is more acute. It will provide funding for community groups to create safe places for children to play and burn off calories and encourage more grocery stores to open in poor neighborhoods and sell fruits, vegetables and other healthful foods at affordable prices.

The foundation's goal is ambitious: Reverse the epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States by 2015.

"What we know doesn't work is just telling people you've got to lose weight," said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, the foundation's president and CEO. "The environment is so connected to the kinds of choices people make in their everyday lives."

She said some of the effort, which was announced yesterday, will be low-tech and low-cost, such as encouraging communities to create "walking school buses," with children – led by an adult – walking to and from school each day.

The \$500 million will be spent over the next five years to improve children's access to healthy foods. For example, the foundation will support efforts to bring farmers markets into cities or get local bodegas to stock more fresh produce, Lavizzo-Mourey said.

"Parents have to be a part of this and we know they need some help creating an environment in which kids can make healthy choices," Lavizzo-Mourey said, adding that schools must also provide education on nutrition.

Obesity rates among children ages 6 to 11 have quadrupled in the past four decades. Today, more than 33 percent of children and adolescents – or 25 million children – are overweight or obese. About 80 percent of overweight teen-agers will be overweight or obese as adults, studies have found.

Researchers and public policy experts have long called rising obesity a major and costly public health threat because obesity can lead to diabetes, heart disease, stroke and certain types of cancer. Obesity costs the nation \$117 billion a year in health care costs and lost productivity, according to some estimates.

"I think this is a breakthrough," said Kelly Brownell, director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. "What is needed is a visionary approach that tackles the fundamental drivers of the problem. The foundation has a history of doing that with other issues, like tobacco."

New Jersey Health Commissioner Fred Jacobs said the mere announcement of the foundation's commitment will highlight the seriousness of childhood obesity.

"It's a mark of authenticity," he said.

Jacobs said he has already met with foundation officials as the state maps out its own initiative to reverse obesity in children.

"Everybody has an idea what healthy kids look like and what healthy kids eat, and some of those things are wrong," he said.

Obesity experts welcomed the foundation's commitment, but some wondered if "it's a day late and dollar short," said Naomi Neufeld, who is on the board of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists and runs a program for overweight children at UCLA.

"It's wonderful, but we wouldn't be in this predicament if people paid attention 10 to 15 years ago," she said. "I say, 'Good for Robert Wood Johnson.' But their budget of \$500 million is only about 10 percent of the annual budget that food companies have to advertise terrible foods to children."

Others said the foundation has done its homework.

Kendall Sprott, acting chairman of pediatrics at UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School in Newark, said members of the foundation came to the Quitman Street School in Newark a few years ago.

"They were looking at physical education and the playground, meeting with parents and even eating the school lunch," he said. "We took them walking around the neighborhood. It was an eye-opening experience for them."

Experts working with obese children are learning what works, and what does not.

Henry Anhalt, director of pediatric endocrinology at Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, said he does not put kids on restrictive diets they will hate but instead makes simple changes to their current diets. He sees how obesity can hurt children emotionally.

"They're often times not chosen to participate in activities, are not chosen for sports and they just feel dejected," Anhalt said.

Physicians also see physical illness related to obesity. Jonathan Keith-Chandler, a 10-year-old from Newark, battles asthma and sleep apnea. When he checked into the weight management program at Children's Specialized Hospital in Mountainside six months ago, he weighed 312 pounds. He was placed on a low-calorie diet and a daily regimen of exercise, including swimming, running on a treadmill and playing games such as basketball and hockey. He has dropped 72 pounds and will go home next week.

But no macaroni and cheese, his favorite meal, said his 63-year-old grandmother, Carrie Butts.

"Things are going to be a whole lot different now," she said.

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