



## A Comprehensive Approach to Fighting Childhood Obesity: The North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund

In 2005, North Carolina became the first state in the nation to mandate at the State Board of Education level that its K-8 students receive 30 minutes of physical activity per day. Soon after, the state's General Assembly passed legislation requiring rigorous nutrition standards for all school meals and after school snack programs. That same year, North Carolina passed into law restrictions on the caloric value of vending machine items, making North Carolina's vending machine policies among the strictest in the nation.<sup>i</sup>

In a social climate where childhood obesity rates continue to rise, measures such as the ones undertaken by North Carolina offer pragmatic hope that the obesity crisis can be effectively addressed. This brief provides an overview of the wide-ranging efforts that North Carolina has initiated to prevent obesity in its state and serves as a model for the scale of impact that can be achieved through such a comprehensive approach.

A pivotal engine driving North Carolina's obesity prevention activities is an organization called the Health and Wellness Trust Fund (HWTF) Commission. In 2000, the General Assembly created the HWTF to receive 25% of North Carolina's share of the tobacco Master Settlement Agreement.<sup>ii</sup> Chaired by Lt. Governor Beverly Perdue, the Commission addresses four core aspects of North Carolina's health: (1) teen tobacco use (2) prescription drug access and safety for low-income populations, (3) health disparities and (4) obesity. When the obesity rates among young adults in North Carolina climbed to a record high in 2003, it became clear to Lt. Governor Perdue that widespread and immediate action was needed to counter this trend. As Chair of the HWTF, the Lt. Governor enlisted support from multiple stakeholders – state agencies, academic centers, non-profit organizations, and private companies – to tackle the problem. Initially, two main activities were undertaken by HWTF: (1) a Study Committee for Childhood Overweight/Obesity was appointed to develop realistic policies that would create healthier environments in North Carolina, and (2) a public/private partnership

called *Fit Together* was established to spread awareness about the obesity epidemic and to provide individuals and communities with the information and tools necessary to make healthier lifestyle choices. Each of these approaches and their respective components are discussed below.

### ***Fit Families NC: A Study Committee for Childhood Overweight/Obesity***

Prior to HWTF's creation and its work on the obesity issue, the North Carolina Department of Public Health (NCDPH) spearheaded many of North Carolina's obesity prevention efforts. In 2000, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Division created a Task Force to develop a comprehensive policy action plan to stem the rising tide of obesity in North Carolina. These recommendations were produced in a report entitled, *Moving Our Children Towards a Healthy Weight: Finding the Will and the Way*.

In 2004, the HWTF drew from prior work of the NCDPH to convene a Study Committee to further investigate the growing childhood obesity problem in North Carolina and to propose practical policy solutions to reduce obesity. From the beginning, the Committee's dedication to legislative action was made clear by its appointment of representatives from both the state's House of Representatives and Senate to co-chair the study, along with a Commissioner of HWTF, an eminent pediatrician. Nineteen other professionals from diverse backgrounds were chosen to serve on the committee. During the course of one year, seven day-long committee hearings were held to examine childhood obesity in North Carolina. The HWTF made its Study Committee hearings public and encouraged a broad range of stakeholders to participate in the discussions and submit their own recommendations. Five of the seven public hearings were devoted to discussion on various topics in obesity, and experts were invited to present at each one. Over 350 recommendations were formulated targeting early childcare, faith-based organizations, schools, marketing and other areas. More significantly,

seven specific legislative policy proposals were put forth by the Study Committee, which served as the basis for far-reaching reforms now in effect. Of those recommendations, one was unanimously adopted by the State Board of Education and two others were passed into law:

### **1. Physical Activity in Schools: Healthy Active Children Policy**

A daily, 30-minute physical activity requirement for all K- 8 students was adopted by revising the state's Healthy Active Children policy, making North Carolina the first state nationally to champion such a policy at the State Board of Education level. Implementation of the policy began during the 2006-2007 school year.<sup>iii</sup>

### **2. Nutrition Standards in Schools (House Bill 855)**

This Bill required the development of statewide nutrition standards for all school meals, à la carte items, beverages, and the After School Snack Program in elementary, middle and high schools. Changes made to nutritional standards include increasing the number of fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products sold in school meals, while decreasing the number of foods high in total fat, trans fat, saturated fat and sugar.<sup>iv</sup>

### **3. Vending Standards in Schools (Senate Bill 961)**

This Bill required that all soft drink and snack vending sales in elementary schools be banned altogether. In middle schools, sugared carbonated beverages were prohibited from being sold, while high schools had to limit their purchase of these drinks to 50% of the total drinks offered. Further, 75% of all snacks sold in middle and high schools were not allowed to contain more than 200 calories per pack.<sup>v</sup>

Effecting change in policy, however, can have limited impact, unless the groups affected by the policies have adequate financial and logistical support to implement the changes. Thus, getting the *Healthy Active Children* policy revised by the State Board of Education was only the first step; the HWTF then began searching for ways to ensure that schools were given necessary support to

implement its ambitious physical activity requirement. Efforts that the HWTF has made towards realizing the goal of 30 minutes of daily physical activity for K-8 students are ongoing and include:

(1) Collaborating with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and East Carolina University to fund research to develop *Classroom Energizers* (curriculum support activities) that help middle school teachers provide moderate to vigorous exercise for their students, while incorporating learning into the process;

(2) Collaborating with The Center of Excellence for Research, Teaching and Learning at Wake Forest University's School of Medicine to develop a website called *Fit Kids* ([www.FitKidsNC.com](http://www.FitKidsNC.com)) where teachers can access curriculum-based physical activities that are aligned with subject areas from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and can be implemented in a classroom setting; and

(3) Collaborating with DPI, Be Active North Carolina, and the North Carolina Association of Educators to provide every elementary and middle school teacher with training and materials for curriculum-support activities to meet the mandate's requirements. As an incentive for encouraging educators to participate, most teachers can receive 1.0 Standard Renewal Continuing Education credit after attending Healthy Active Children training and utilizing the [www.FitKidsNC.com](http://www.FitKidsNC.com) Web site. Also, school districts receive \$1,000 from HWTF once 70% of their K-8 teachers are trained on effective policy implementation.

Because the 30 minutes of daily physical activity mandate is still in its implementation phase, it is too early to determine the effectiveness of the revised *Healthy Active Children* policy. However, Fit Families NC and other obesity-related stakeholders are examining ways to effectively evaluate these important policy changes.

### ***Fit Together***

In addition to its policy victories, North Carolina has had significant success with its *Fit Together* campaign, which was designed to promote awareness of the risks involved with unhealthy weight and provide people with

the knowledge and tools necessary to address this major health concern. The *Fit Together* campaign was launched in 2004 as a joint initiative between HWTF and Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC).<sup>vi</sup> The campaign has pursued a multi-pronged approach to obesity prevention through sponsorship of various programs that target schools, communities, health professionals and workplaces throughout the state. To summarize, *Fit Together's* activities can be classified into three main components: (1) grants, (2) social marketing and (3) workplace wellness.

### Grants

The HWTF and BCBSNC sponsor grant programs as part of the partnership: (1) School and Community grants and (2) *Fit Community* grants. For the School and Community grants, the HWTF funds an impressive \$9 million in grants to 21 organizations that address the goals and objectives contained in NCDPH's report, *Moving Our Children Toward a Healthy Weight: Finding the Will and the Way*.<sup>vii</sup> Grantees include schools, county health departments and various community organizations who are using the funds primarily to improve physical activity and nutrition in schools and the community.

Grants to support "Fit Communities" are also awarded by *Fit Together* partners and were recently incorporated as part of the campaign in November of 2005. These grants are intended to recognize municipality- and county-led efforts to promote physical activity, healthy eating, and tobacco-free programs, policies, environments and lifestyles. HWTF and BCBSNC have awarded a total of \$2.2 million in grants to 21 communities to promote healthy nutrition and physical activity choices. The criteria for selection were derived from peer-reviewed studies and national programs. Active Living by Design, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides technical assistance for the *Fit Community* grantees.<sup>viii</sup>

### Social Marketing

In addition to offering a variety of grants, the *Fit Together* campaign has been very proactive in sending a strong health message to North Carolinians focusing on obesity. This effort represents the media component of the *Fit Together* campaign. In 2005, the campaign aired about 32 hours of television news and printed 3,265 column inches of newspaper coverage to encourage healthy living.<sup>ix</sup> To complement this message, *Fit Together* de-

veloped a website that is replete with health information for everyone including students, parents, employers, employees, and others. But beyond the provision of information, the website is also useful for helping individuals understand the status of their health (by taking an online personal health risk assessment) and learning about the resources in North Carolina communities that can be used to improve their health.

### Workplace Wellness

In fall 2006, *Fit Together* launched its most recent addition to the campaign – *Fit Workplace* – that strives to make healthy behaviors part of the business environment in North Carolina. Recognizing that saturating working adults with information on healthy practices is often counter-productive unless the conditions in workplaces are conducive to making healthy choices, *Fit Together* designed a content-rich website to help employers:

- learn about workplace wellness 'best practices' from companies large and small across North Carolina through a NC-specific searchable database;
- identify their company's wellness strengths and weaknesses through a 'workplace health gauge,' which then makes personalized recommendations on how to start or improve upon their wellness practices;
- receive detailed information on how to effectively and inexpensively incorporate wellness into their business environment; and
- provide employees with tips on how they can contribute to their office's workplace wellness.

The goal behind *Fit Together's Workplace Wellness* initiative is to illustrate rational and affordable ways for employers to encourage habits that lead to healthier lifestyles for their employees. In doing so, diseases can be prevented and employers spared the consequent costs of treating those diseases as well as the costs associated with employee absenteeism. Already, several businesses in North Carolina are experiencing the benefits of having workplace wellness programs. Blue Ridge Paper, a paper products company in Canton, recently established an onsite health clinic, which is estimated to have saved the company more than \$500,000 in just its first year. More information can be found at [www.FitTogetherNC.com](http://www.FitTogetherNC.com).

## Outcomes

Although the impact of North Carolina's obesity-related policy changes have not yet been evaluated, assessments of the grant-funded activities of *Fit Together* have been ongoing. The Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University was given the responsibility of performing the evaluations since all of HWTF's grant programs are evaluated by an external agency. While only preliminary results exist, the signs are already promising. In 2006, a total of 1,683 K-9th grade students participated in *Fit Together*-funded school programs. Results from a cohort study indicate that 93% of participants either maintained or decreased their Body Mass

Index (BMI), while 44% reported to have increased their level of physical activity.<sup>x</sup> HWTF plans to use the evaluation data to draw valuable lessons that can be translated into "best practices" once proven consistent over time and in various settings.<sup>xi</sup>

North Carolina has led the way in demonstrating that using cross-sector partnerships, significant strides can be made to fight the rise of obesity. Given North Carolina's successes, other states should feel encouraged to pursue similar obesity prevention efforts.

<sup>i</sup> *Childhood Obesity in North Carolina*. A Report of Fit Families NC: A Study Committee for Childhood Overweight/Obesity. The North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund. October 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> The Health and Wellness Trust Fund web site. *Fit Together* (Obesity Initiative). *Fit Families North Carolina: A Study Committee on Childhood Overweight/Obesity*. <[http://www.healthwellnc.com/hwtfc/htmlfiles/fundprty\\_obesity-FitFamilies.html](http://www.healthwellnc.com/hwtfc/htmlfiles/fundprty_obesity-FitFamilies.html)>

<sup>iv</sup> NC General Assembly Web site. <[www.ncleg.net](http://www.ncleg.net)>.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> *Investing in a Healthy NC: A Progress Report from the NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission*. April 2006.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

### About NIHCM Foundation

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