

“Beyond French Fries”  
Testimony before Boston City Council Hearing  
“What Public Schools Can Do to Curb Pediatric Obesity”  
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Thank you for the invitation to speak to the Boston City Council on the important issue of public schools and urban pediatric obesity.

Clinically obese children are not happy children. They are unhappy children. They are lonely, confused, depressed, angry, and frustrated whether they are six or sixteen. Food may have become their chief source of comfort. Let's create schools where food can loosen its grip and they can become happy, productive young people who are active and engaged as leaders and learners in their families, schools and communities.

I would like to share with the City Council what we are doing at Codman Academy Charter School, our new small, public charter high school in Dorchester which is on site at our primary partner, Codman Square Health Center. My remarks are with an eye toward what lessons may be most applicable for replication in the Boston Public School system. As a charter school, we view our school as the R&D wing of urban public schools. We can try things out which, if successful, may be implemented more widely.

Codman Academy Charter School is open to all Boston residents and admits students by lottery. 82% of our students are eligible for free or reduced lunch; we have five primary languages represented in our students' homes and 18% of our students have special education individualized education plans. Most of our students come from the surrounding Four Corners/Codman Square neighborhoods, one of the city's most economically challenged. Now in our second year, we have 57 students in grades 9-10 and we will grow to 130 students in grades 9-12. Our mission is to prepare all our students for higher education. Approximately 25% of our students are overweight to clinically obese. In other words, our students and their families are representative of those served by Boston public high schools which do not have admission requirements of any kind.

Why do high school students overeat? The first reason is because they are tired. We have a 97% daily average attendance for our six day a week program. Our students attend school Monday – Friday 9 am – 5 pm and Saturdays 9 am – noon. For the purposes of this discussion, the important point is that our school day officially begins at 9 am which is quite different from the start times of Boston district high schools which are as early as 7:30 am.. Adolescents, like infants are on a physical growth spurt and they need their sleep because it is during sleep that bones actually grow. Last year, Codman students grew an average of one half inch between the fall and spring. They gained an average of 1.25 pounds which is within normal guidelines during growth years. However, 33% of our students lost weight ranging from .5 pound to 15 pounds. Adolescents' sleep cycles are such that they inevitably stay up late and consequently they make up their sleep in the morning. The first step towards addressing overeating is to have students receive sufficient rest. Obtaining sufficient rest also ensures students are alert in class and arrive to school on time. At Codman, if a student were ever to appear sleepy in class, we would view it as a sign of depression and refer the student for counseling. In the rare instance this has been a problem, this has been our solution and it has been quite effective.

The second reason students eat an unhealthy diet is because this is what is served to them or available to them at school. One student told me about attending his Boston public

middle school last year where he had fifteen minutes for lunch and all he ate was “the chips in the vending machines. As part of our comprehensive approach to health and promoting wellness, we have no vending machines on campus. We contract with a vendor for our breakfast, school lunch and snack programs. In our contract, we specifically exclude high fat items such as cream cheese, sausage and french fries and high sugar cereals and we have written into our contract a requirement that we have fresh salad at least twice each week and fresh fruit any day it is available.

The third reason students overeat in my view is they are self-medicating for depression. The epidemic of urban teen obesity is paralleled by the epidemic of untreated adolescent depression and they are inextricably linked as anyone who has ever struggled with an eating disorder well knows. At Codman Academy Charter School, we view adolescence as a time of stress and transition and all our students are automatically in what we call “Talking Circles”. These are single sex groups of no more than ten girls or ten boys facilitated by a licensed social worker from Codman Square Health Center. Instead of stuffing their feelings, they learn to talk about them in a safe way and place.

Will high school students eat breakfast, or salads and fresh fruits? We have found that they will, particularly if they have a role in serving the food. Our lunch is 45 minutes and served by students on a rotating basis. Students also clean up and do not waste food. We use the well-proven power of peer pressure to promote healthy eating. Additionally our faculty members serve as important role models for healthy eating themselves. After a hard morning of classes, lunch is a time to relax or participate in a club meeting. Healthy eating means lunch is not rushed.

We successfully approached Weight Watchers about obtaining fee waivers for students interested in participating in their program which is now offered on site at Codman Square Health Center. Currently, several students and a faculty member are participating with significant success.

The fourth reason students are obese is lack of physical activity. Daily physical exercise is another important component of our wellness approach. First, our students walk extensively because we think there is a health value in walking and because we do not have our own physical education facilities. Weekly, students walk an average of 6 miles during the school day in addition to physical education classes. We walk so often our students call us “the walking school.” Four days each week students also participate in physical exercise – either tennis instruction or playing basketball. We have several athletic teams: co-ed soccer, girls and boys basketball and Metro lacrosse for girls and boys. Although we are a very small school, we strongly encourage students to play a team sport.

Schools can’t do everything and without good communication with families, they can’t do very much at all that has lasting impact. But if schools are conceived as places where educators are learning coaches for students and their families, then learning that starts in the home can be fostered at school and vice versa. For this reason, we place a great emphasis on our work with families, and this includes the issue of nutrition. For example, our December parent meeting hosted guests from Nutritionists of Color who gave a “Healthy eating for the holidays” cooking demonstration. Our ninth grade families receive free home delivery of *The Boston Globe* with its frequent information about health, recipes and wellness.

Have our students begun to lose weight? Yes, and some students have lost ten pounds or more. . Is every student participating in physical exercise and walking? Yes, unless there is a specific medical excuse. Is the school lunch getting more nutritious as well as appealing? Yes. We still have a long way to go, but we are clearly making progress.

10 steps we are taking which other schools may consider adopting:

1. Start school later in the morning to insure teens get adequate rest.
2. Eliminate high fat and high surgar items from menu and substitute with fresh fruits and salads.
3. Ban vending machines on campus.
4. Extend lunch periods and redesign to make a more pleasant experience.
5. Build in walking and require physical exercise daily.
6. Have athletic teams for all students, not just traditional “athletes”.
7. Support adults as role models for health and wellness with materials and Weight Watchers group on site.
8. Single sex “Talking Circles” with social worker as safe place to express feelings instead of “stuffing them”.
9. Annual camping trip with entire student body and faculty where students see faculty role model healthy eating and physical activity.
10. Nutrition/ healthy cooking elective taught by graduate student in nutrition.

We realize our students need to pass necessary gateway exams, but we are primarily focused on the development of their minds, bodies and character. How you feel about your body – how well you take care of your own body – we believe is an indicator of your self-confidence and sense of responsibility toward yourself. Schools have an important educational role in nurturing students’ learning about expressing their feelings as well as their ideas, taking care of themselves through the food they eat and the physical exercise they get each day. This is not time away from learning; this is important learning in its own right.