

A MESSAGE FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS

Much concern has been expressed about children's weight, spurring a variety of school-based interventions such as body mass index (BMI) screening, weight-related "report cards," and campaigns emphasizing the dangers of carrying excess weight.

These anti-obesity campaigns are damaging and ineffective. Think about the impact of BMI report cards: the heavier kids get pathologized, bullied, and teased by their peers, and are put on diets and exercise programs that set them up for a lifetime of struggle, feelings of failure, and a greater risk for developing a life-threatening eating disorder. The thinner kids—who may have similar health habits or be maintaining their low weights through damaging diets or obsessive exercise—get ignored. Meanwhile, every child across the weight spectrum is saddled with a fear of fat and a bias against fat people.

It's tough enough for kids to enjoy their bodies. Few are at peace in their bodies, whether they're fat or fear becoming fat. Every time we make fat the problem, these are side effects, however unintended they may be.

Eating well and being regularly active are valuable for kids of all sizes. Good health habits can be promoted for their own sake, rather than as obesity prevention measures.

Here are a few ideas you can implement in your school:

- Take the focus off weight and put it on health and self-esteem. Dump weight-based programs like BMI screening.
- Teach children that their bodies deserve love and respect no matter how much they weigh.
- Implement media literacy programs that challenge the current thin ideal in the media. Discuss body size as a diversity issue as you would race or gender.

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- Avoid words like “overweight” and “obese,” which promote judgment and stigma.
- Create an environment that supports enjoyable physical activity, honoring that different body types are suited to different types of movement. A fat child may have more difficulty running than a thin child, for example, but may excel at swimming.
- Encourage kids to honor their body signals of hunger, fullness, and appetite. Discourage dieting; all diets undermine the dieters’ ability to trust their own capacity to meet their own needs. It also sets the dieter up for feelings of failure and inadequacy.
- Display artwork and images in your classroom that celebrate children of varying sizes.
- Enforce zero-tolerance policies regarding weight-based victimization and bullying. Be available and approachable to students who are victims of such bullying.
- You are a role model for students. Challenge your own size bias and incorporate healthy habits and attitudes into your own life.

It’s hard to challenge the common dogma that stigmatizes weight and promotes dieting as a virtue. But there is substantial evidence that these ideas have backfired, causing more problems than they solve. Educate yourself about the new paradigm in health promotion, which has proven to be much more successful than fighting obesity. It’s called Health at Every Size.

More details can be found in the book, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight* (www.HAESbook.com). Visit the HAES Community Resources (www.HAESCommunity.Org) to get connected with the community and discover school-based programs that incorporate Health at Every Size.

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