



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

In the Battle Against Childhood Obesity, Review Effectiveness Before Implementing Policies

Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey – March 10, 2010. In a study conducted by Cornell Economist John Cawley, Cawley states that before developing specific anti-obesity strategies, lawmakers and advocates should review the evidence on program effectiveness and costs in order to avoid policies that either won't work or will waste money. Cawley's article appeared in "The Economics of Childhood Obesity," published in the peer-reviewed journal *Health Affairs*, March 2, 2010.

Cawley, associate professor of policy analysis and management, argues that government spending should focus on programs that offer "the biggest bang for the buck." In his paper, Cawley examines recent studies of several youth-focused initiatives to reduce obesity, finding that the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH), a multistate program that teaches elementary school kids how to eat well and exercise regularly, is the most cost-effective. It costs \$900 per "quality-adjusted life-year," a standard measure of the benefits of public health interventions. By comparison, a study of "walking school buses," a popular approach that encourages children and adults to walk to school together, found the program to be ineffective.

"There is widespread recognition that childhood obesity is a problem in need of attention and resources," said Cawley, who has served on the Institute of Medicine's Committee to Prevent Childhood Obesity. "But it's a bit of a wild west, anything-goes environment when it comes to creating anti-obesity programs and policies. With limited resources to spend, it would be counter-productive to rush into programs that are not cost-effective and won't provide the greatest return on investment."

The "walking school bus" sounds like a neat idea, but it doesn't increase kids' physical activity or prevent obesity. "Every county, employer, school, day care and community agency is trying to do something about obesity right now, which is great, but we also need to evaluate these programs so we can learn what works," he said.

Public support for anti-obesity policies hinges greatly upon how the cost issue is framed, says Cawley, who obtained these results from the 2009 Empire State Poll conducted by the Cornell Survey Research Institute. Without mention of costs, 92 percent of 800 New Yorkers polled agreed that the government should improve nutrition in school cafeterias. However, when people were asked whether taxes should be raised to improve nutrition in school cafeterias, support falls to 41 percent.

Cawley's paper also describes the economic contributors to, and the consequences of, sharply rising childhood obesity rates in recent decades and describes the economic case for

government interventions. In 2008, obesity added more than \$27 billion in costs to Medicare and Medicaid, which are funded by taxpayer dollars, and it contributed \$49 billion to private health insurer costs. Therefore it makes sense for government to reduce and prevent obesity, in order to limit these costs imposed on the general population, he says.

Independent Cornell University Study Finds CATCH the Most Cost-Effective Program in the Fight Against Childhood Obesity

In his paper, Cawley examines recent studies of several youth-focused initiatives to reduce obesity, finding that the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) the most cost-effective program in the fight against childhood obesity. CATCH was designed to promote physical activity, healthy food choices, and the prevention of tobacco use in elementary school aged children. According to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, “over the past three decades, the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2-5 years and adolescents aged 12-19, and has more than tripled for children aged 6-11 years.” The CATCH Program has proved that teaching children that eating healthy and being physically active every day can be FUN and by establishing healthy habits in childhood can promote positive behavior changes that carry into adulthood.

The CATCH Program focuses on coordinating four components: the Eat Smart school nutrition program, K-5 and 6-8 Classroom curriculum, a Physical Education, and a Family program. The Coordination of health messages between these four component areas is critical to positively impact children's knowledge and behavior. For over 10 years CATCH has guided schools, families, and children in the process of being healthy. CATCH, the largest school-based health promotion study in the U.S., has demonstrated that unhealthy behaviors such as eating foods high in saturated fat and physical inactivity can be changed to achieve positive healthy lifestyle habits that will last a lifetime. For more information about CATCH visit www.catchinfo.org.

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