Relieving the Burden of Weight Stigma

Dealing with the Problem of Weight-based Bullying in Schools and Taking Actions to Initiate Changes in Anti-Bullying Bills.

Tag Words: obesity and bullying, overweight and bullying, obesity in school, bullying in school, bullying among children

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Summary

The epidemic of obesity is spreading with a tremendous speed in our society, and is especially vivid among young population. As a direct outcome of having extra weight, children encounter weight-based bullying in schools. Today weight discrimination is compared to racial harassment as it is 66% larger than it used to be. Not only such negative behavior diminishes children mood and encouragement in any weight-loss and lifestyle changes, but also it impacts children’s psychological status. Statistics shows that bullied child develops depression, low self esteem, eating disorders and more prone to suicide attempts. Besides, future lives of stigmatized obese children are getting compromised and these children on average spend fewer years in education, marry less often and have lower socioeconomic status. The project focused on analyzing the problem as well as what is being done to address it nationwide and specifically in the state of New Jersey. A recently introduced Bill No 3466 targets bullying prevention in schools and may lead to many important changes in school environment, decreasing bullying and hopefully suicide attempts. However, the bill when describing bullying does not add weight in the protected categories. That is why the service part of the project focused on contacting legislators in order to amend the bill and include weight category in the definition of bullying.

Video Link

Relieving the Burden of Weight Stigma: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8qDg5bpo7M
**The Issue: Obesity**

**Introduction**

Today the world is witnessing one of the most dramatic consequences of human neglect towards their lifestyle and diet - the obesity epidemic. If only a decade ago, the epidemiologists expressed their worries about extra pounds appearing on people's waists, today the media and statistics are screaming about the numbers of overweight and obese individuals. According to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, in 2009, 36.2% individuals were obese; 27.2% were overweight, and 35.9% were neither overweight, nor obese. In other words, only 1/3 of the population has been able to keep their weight normal (19). The nature of the severity of the problem is being defined by its consequences since these numbers literally signify that 2 out of 3 people are at risk of developing type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (13). Not only obesity detrimentally impacts the lives of these individuals and even leads to about 200,000 deaths annually, but it also impacts the health care of the country. In 2000, obesity costs were $117 billion nationwide which makes 9% of health-care costs (2). Looking at our own state budget, in 2003, New Jersey spent $2.3 billion on medical costs resulted from adult obesity (15).

The most unfortunate outcome of the epidemic is the fact that it has spread with a tremendous speed in our society throughout all population and impacted our children's lives. For the last decade, the numbers of overweight children has been tripled and now make more than 30% of population (17). NHANES analysis shows that in 2007-2008, about 17% of children between ages 2-10 were obese (3). Looking at the problem from the local perspective, according to Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance System, in 2006, New Jersey was in the first place nationwide having the highest obesity numbers among low-income children aged between 2 and 5. Youth Risk Behavior Survey data show that in 2005, 15% of children in the grades 9-12 were overweight, and 11% were obese (15).

Therefore, there is an urgent need to take action and stop further increase in the numbers. The message about consequences of obesity has to reach every house in order to initiate any change in people’s eating and lifestyle behaviors. This research will investigate on the seriousness of the problem, underline the main causes of the situation and identify the most dramatic consequences of children obesity, focusing on psychological state of overweight children and weight-based bullying that takes place in schools. In addition, the article will look at the actions being taken nationwide and in New Jersey in schools to stop obesity and bullying.

**Obesity Causing Factors**

In order to analyze obesity and its impact on children's lives, there is a need to define what overweight and obesity are. Children and adolescents’ healthy status is determined from body mass index (BMI) percentiles. BMI growth charts account for children weight, height and age and put children in the ranges of underweight, healthy, at risk for overweight, overweight and obese by comparing anthropological characteristics with healthy children’s data. The child is considered overweight when his or her BMI is above the 85th and below the 95th percentiles; obesity range includes children and adolescents above the 95th percentile (5).

There are a number of factors that contribute to the obesity epidemic. One of the most objective and uncontrollable causes is genetics. Twin studies show a correlation between genes and obesity.
risk due to certain hormones that impact body metabolism. However, environment and behavior play much bigger roles and explain why the numbers of obese individuals have increased so rapidly (1). It is not the human genome that led to the first lady's active involvement into raising public awareness and increased the chance of becoming obese up to 70% for each child (17). Environment and personal choices, such as higher consumption of sugar sweetened beverages and ready-to-eat foods, larger portion sizes, more frequent snacking and eating out, increase in television viewing, decrease in physical activity, walking to and from school and outside playing and other similar factors that place children in higher percentiles (1,9).

The biggest problem that is taking place in our daily lives is that calories consumed are not equal to calories spent. In other words, extra calories are not balanced out by physical activities. 67% of children do not go to their daily physical education classes even though the guidelines suggest being physically active at least 1 hour on most days (6). Besides the more weight a child has, the less likely he or she is to be engaged in physical activity (14). Instead children rather spend their time watching TV, playing video games or looking at the pictures of their friends on Facebook. According to surgeon general, 43% of adolescents watch TV more than 2 hours daily instead of doing physical activity during this time (17). A number of studies found a direct correlation between obesity and TV viewing and explained it by the fact that high calories snacks are often eaten during TV time. Another negative impact of television is that children's food preferences are shaped by advertisements of unhealthy foods during screen time (4).

Besides the above mentioned factors, family social economic status may also contribute to overweight because 31% of children skip breakfast in the mornings which contributes to gaining weight (16). From the local perspective, only 30% of children in New Jersey fulfill the guidelines on physical activity; 36% spend more than 3 hours daily in front of TV, and only about 1 out of 5 children meets the requirements for fruits and vegetables (15).

Obesity Consequences
It is important to raise awareness and address children obesity because of detrimental complications the epidemic imposes on children's health status. Overweight and obese individuals can easily develop Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and even cancer (13). Another drawback of the problem can be the effect obesity has on the future of teenagers. According to Whitaker et al, obese children between 10 -14 years of age have 80% chance of becoming an obese adult (26). Besides, obese youth have greater risk of morbidity and mortality in adult years (13).

Apart from physical life changes that take place as a result of obesity, another very significant consequence of having extra weight which is often ignored is the psychological burden of weight stigma. It involves social discrimination and bullying and often takes place in school and work environment. Today the size of weight discrimination can easily be compared to racial discrimination since it is 66% larger than it used to be. Overweight people are often accepted as lazy, undisciplined and foolish people, especially in a work environment. Statistics show that obese individuals have fewer chances to be hired, promoted and even get the same salaries as other employees, even though they do not differ in their education and performance. For example, 64 pounds of extra weight results in 9% decrease in wages for white females. Not only this impacts SES of big people, but also changes their emotional status and develops unordinary
behavior. If compared to obese individuals who are not bullied, stigmatized obese people might start binge eating and stop exercising, thus interrupting any weight loss initiatives and additionally worsening the situation (21).

Weight discrimination is often expressed in the form of bullying, verbal, physical and social negative behavior displayed towards a bully. Bullying is most frequent and powerful at school. During adolescence, youth relies greatly on peers for support and establishment of self esteem, and since teenagers are undergoing physical changes, they become especially sensitive to peer remarks at this age. Thus, peer negative behavior psychologically damages a child and leaves a mark for the whole life, developing low self esteem, anxiety and depression (13). Parker and Asher found poor peer relationships and low social acceptance impact futures of children and often lead to such events as dropping outs, psychopathology and even criminality. According to their analysis, 28 – 70% of disordered adults had poor peer relationships in childhood (18). The National Association of Attorneys Generals informs that youth violence is primary caused by bullying and harassment (2). A group of scientists looked at the 7 year impact of body image on social and economic status, as well as self esteem among 10,039 adolescents. The results showed that overweight people have lower self esteem, earn less money, marry less often and do not spend as many years in education as people with normal weight.

### Table 2. Estimated Effect of Overweight in Adolescence on Subsequent Social and Economic Characteristics and Self-Esteem among Women.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>OBSERVED VALUE</th>
<th>GROUP ESTIMATE OF DIFFERENCE (95% CI)</th>
<th>ADJUSTED ESTIMATE OF DIFFERENCE (95% CI)</th>
<th>P VALUE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>overweight (n = 4922)</td>
<td>nonoverweight (n = 4943)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (%)</td>
<td>28 56</td>
<td>-28 (-21 to -35)</td>
<td>-20 (-13 to -27)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income ($)</td>
<td>18,372 30,586</td>
<td>-12,214 (-10,295 to -14,133)</td>
<td>-6,710 (-3,942 to -9,478)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income below poverty level (%)†</td>
<td>32 13</td>
<td>19 (11 to 27)</td>
<td>10 (4 to 16)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
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<td>Education (yr)</td>
<td>12.1 13.1</td>
<td>-1.1 (-0.8 to -1.4)</td>
<td>-0.3 (-0.1 to -0.6)</td>
<td>0.009</td>
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<td>Completed college (%)</td>
<td>9 21</td>
<td>-12 (-7 to -17)</td>
<td>-3 (-8 to 2)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
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<td>Self-esteem in 1987</td>
<td>32.4 33.6</td>
<td>-1.1 (-0.6 to -1.7)</td>
<td>-0.4 (-0.8 to 0.1)</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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*Overweight was determined in 1981, social and economic characteristics in 1988, and self-esteem in 1987. Effects have been estimated from regression equations with control for base-line variables. Data are from the NLSY. The sample size varies slightly because of missing data. The following base-line variables were controlled for in multivariate regression analyses: household income in 1979, educational level in 1979, marital status in 1979, mother’s educational level in 1979, father’s educational level in 1979, AFQT score in 1980, the presence of a work-limiting chronic health condition in 1979 (excluding obesity), height in 1981, self-esteem in 1980 (measured on the Rosenberg scale), age in 1981, and race or ethnic group; separate indicators were included for missing data on income, father’s educational level, and mother’s educational level. CI denotes confidence interval.

†Household poverty was defined according to federal poverty guidelines.

Obesity and overweight predisposes children to be bullied and have social and psychological damage. As BMI increases, there is an increase in bullying experiences (13). A British research on 4163 boys and 4047 girls at age 7.5 showed that obese boys were 1.66 times, and obese girls were 1.53 times more likely to be bullies a year later (11). Another negative consequence of peer victimization is its impact on the decrease in physical activity. Diminished mood and depression decrease motivation to exercise and prevent children from engaging in sports. Thus, bullying should be strongly considered when increasing physical activities (23).

Besides low self-esteem and decrease in exercising, the outcomes of bullying may be even more dangerous. The survey of 4746 adolescents, grades 7 to 12, showed that about 30% of adolescents are being bullied by their peers, and this behavior often leads young adults not only
to depression, but also to suicide thoughts and attempts (7). In 2010, bullying was the cause of many student suicides nationwide (2).

<table>
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<th>Table 2. Proportion of Respondents Reporting Each Emotional Health Concern, by Teasing Experience</th>
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<td>Overall</td>
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Addressing Obesity Issues Nationwide

Fighting obesity involves eliminating or reducing earlier described obesity causing factors: following mypyramid.gov guidelines about daily diet requirements, decreasing the intake of sugar-sweetened beverages and fast food, limiting eating out, decreasing portion sizes, sharing meals with family, decreasing TV time and introducing physical activities into a daily schedule. Step by step introduction of these changes should be supported by both the family and school. Family is an important target in any weight-loss attempt because parents often play a model role in their children's lives. Besides, often parents underestimate the weight status of their children. A study involving 487 children and 406 parents showed that 63% of parents assumed that their overweight and obese children have normal or overweight status, and many of them are not worried about obesity of their children (12).

One of the first places where the change should be initiated is school environment since schools have the biggest influence on students’ eating behaviors and physical activity due to the fact that children spend the most time there. Currently, many legal actions targeting decrease in obesity are reinforced in schools nationwide. In California, non-nutritious foods are limited in schools and beverages are standardized. In Colorado, free fruits and vegetables are provided to students in public schools; elementary and middle schools can sell only water, milk or 100% juice. In Georgia, schools that promote physical activity and healthy foods might receive The Healthy School Award. Iowa is about to implement the Healthy Kids Act which would require 30 minutes of exercising from every student and employment of a registered dietitian. Massachusetts has created Mass in Motion program to promote healthy eating everywhere including schools. The Healthy Choices program touched 75 000 students and resulted in increase in physical activity and decrease in watching TV. It assesses schools for physical activity and nutrition, implements school activities to practice healthy eating and spreads out "5-2-1" message (5 for daily servings of fruits and vegetables, 2 for limit in hours of TV time, and 1 for minimum hours of physical activity). Nebraska “Whatcha doin?” campaign targets teenagers in high schools and promotes physical activity and eating fruits and vegetables. New York promotes TV turnoff weeks in schools statewide and implements Farm-to-School programs (20).
However, more actions are needed to reach more vivid results. Center for Disease Control outlines the most important actions that the government should implement in schools. The list includes creation of school health councils and wellness policies, a certification and professional development of school staff, standards for food and beverages sold in school, and health and physical education (22). Even simple actions like including healthier and local food items in salad bars or changing vending machine items, promoting and rewarding for participation in sports could help children develop healthier dietary and lifestyle behaviors.

**Addressing Weight Stigma**

The incidents of bullying have begun to attract more attention in the last years, and many actions has been done to prevent bullying in schools. For example, PACER (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) made October a National Bullying Prevention Month in order to increase awareness and promote activities and education that would decrease bullying (24). Popular among young people Facebook website has a page Youth Against Weight Discrimination that addresses the issue and unites people in the fight against the discrimination (27). Some people are taking bullying seriously and fight for the rights of big people, calling themselves “fat activists”. There is also the Health at every Size movement created by a nutrition professor Dr. Bacon who also wrote a book under a similar name (8).

A number of organizations legally protect the rights of people with extra weight. One of them, the Council on Size & Weight Discrimination Inc, states that overweight and obese individuals have the right to be defended against discrimination. As a ground for the defense, the practice uses the following anti-weight discrimination laws: Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 which protects people with disabilities against discrimination at work, in public places, when using government services and transportation (25). However, these laws do not mention weight as a protected category. Weight is just assumed as a distinguished personal characteristic along with gender, ethnicity and others. The Americans with Disabilities Act is used on the basis of viewing overweight and obesity as a disability.

Unfortunately, there are only few legislature acts in the country that include weight in the list of protected categories. One of them that received the most attention is Elliot Larsen Civil Rights Act, Act 453 of 1976, Sec. 209 in the State of Michigan; others are implemented on the city level and are active in Santa Cruz and San Francisco, CA, Washington D.C., Binghamton, NY, Urbana, IL, and Madison, WI (8,25). As of today, there are no specific federal laws that protect adults and children from weight-based bullying or discrimination. Thus, in legal sense, nothing can stop against weight discrimination, and that is why 98 % cases are won by the employers (25). More action is needed towards the changes in the legislature, and public support is essential to make these changes. One study investigated on the topic of public attitude towards potential laws against weight discrimination. 1,001 adult participants nationwide were asked in online surveys if they would support adding obesity to The Americans with Disabilities Act, if their state should follow Michigan's example and include weight in the list of protected categories, if they think that the Weight Discrimination in Employment Act should be enacted that would be similar to The Age Discrimination in Employment Act, targeting the prevention of weight discrimination at work. Results showed that 65% men and 81% women support potential laws. However, the least voted law was The Americans with Disabilities Act which suggests that
Americans do not consider obesity a disability. Also 47% of men and 61% of women agree that body weight should be added to list of protected categories in the Civil Rights laws (21).

Addressing Obesity and Bullying in New Jersey

New Jersey Legislators are also actively taking actions to solve the problems of obesity and bullying. Starting from 2003, the state of New Jersey has been introducing bills (3592, 1515, 1613, 1931, 1970) to enhance the care of overweight and obese and extend health insurances coverage for obesity and overweight treatment on fee-for-service basis. The resolution No. 122 (2006) encourages higher education establishments to implement educational programs on obesity in order to educate the public on obesity. Resolution No. 47 (2010) makes April a “Shape up New Jersey Month” and encourages events and activities that promote exercising. Bill No. 2854 (2010) establishes the last week of September to be “Jersey Fresh Farm to School Week” in order to emphasize New Jersey agriculture and fresh foods and their impact on good health and good grades. Regarding body image, Bill No. 3140 establishes a mandatory health screening in grades 1, 4, 7 and 10 in order to calculate students' BMI percentiles and report results with explanations to parents. Bill No. 986 requires schools to post nutritional information on all food and beverages sold on school's website, distribute this information to parents and display it in school cafeteria (2). There is also the Safe Routes to Schools program that promotes bicycling and walking to schools (20).

Bullying and harassment among children on school grounds are also actively addressed in the bills of New Jersey Legislature. Bills No. 3405 (2004), 3429 and 3432 (2001) encourage schools to adopt policies that would prevent bullying on school property. The policy should describe expected behavior from each student, consequences of the violation of the policy and the school response to such incidents. In addition, Bill No. 3429 gives $250,000 and Bill No. 3405 gives $70,000 of funding to train teachers on the policy. As a result of the above mentioned bills, the law AB 1874 against bullying of children was enacted in September, 2002. Later Bills No. 3791 and 3893 added electronic communication to the list of bullying methods and prohibited bullying gestures and written actions such as emails and phone text messages.

In 2007, Bill No. 4591 revised the law to emphasize that gender and national origin are protected against harassment. Extra penalties for the offense were introduced, including completion of a program on understanding the diversity of population, counseling sessions targeting reduction of violent behavior, and financial or other compensation to an agency that serves the victim. The amendment added gender and nationality discrimination to the civil cause of action for bias crime victims and made offense a subject of the New Jersey criminal code. Victims Crime Compensation Agency has a right to request payments from the offender. The information about the offense is included in the local and county police reports of crime addressed to Attorney General. All new police officers are required to have training on how to handle bias intimidation crimes. The Commission on Bullying is to be established to work on bullying regulation, protection, and teachers' training funding. Bill No. 3282 (2010) gives greater protection to bullies and emphasizes their safety. Educational programs are to be implemented that would teach victims how to respond to the harassment. Communication on bullying is to be approved between schools if the bullying takes place in more than one school. Another recently introduced Bill No. 3328 limits Internet use for “cyber bullying” offenders. If offenders fail to comply, the
limitations would become a crime of the fourth degree, and the punishment involves a fine of up to $10,000, and/or imprisonment of up to 18 months.

Bill No. A3466 called The "Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act" is the newest legislature action that was introduced in November 8th, 2010 in response to suicide incidents that took place in the state as a result of bullying. The bill amends the current anti-bullying law by editing the definition of bullying to include both physical and emotional harm. All school staff members are to be trained on harassment, intimidation, and bullying in order to prevent suicide among students. Communities with high risk of suicide are to give students instructions how to reduce suicide risk. Candidates for school administration for 2011-2012 have to complete programs on bullying prevention. A conviction of “bias intimidation” is officially added to crimes. Bullying prevention policies are now required to be developed in schools, not encouraged like in past bills. A school safety team and a school anti-bullying specialist must be appointed to watch for positive behaviors and deal with bullying incidents. Every school should have a protocol and procedures described on how to investigate incidents and deal with offenders. The School Report Card data will be created with reports of all incidents. “Bullying Prevention Fund” is created in the Department of Education to fund training on bullying prevention. First Monday in October is a “Week of Respect”. Discipline measures should be taken against school staff members who do not report the incident within 2 days. All public institutions of higher education are required to add policy on bullying, intimidation and harassment to the student code of conduct (2).

Conclusion
Obesity, especially among children, should be one of the primary concerns of our society. We, as adults, have to help children live healthier lives by promoting daily activities and healthy eating. We should act as a role model and exhibit a positive behavior in our diet and lifestyle. Besides fighting to prevent further increase in obesity numbers, special attention has to be paid in dealing with the consequences of being overweight. Obesity awareness has to address psychological status of big people since they are often the victims of social discrimination and bullying. One of the many reasons why bullying is so frequent is because many offenders do not accept obesity or overweight as a disease or disability. Since gaining weight is often under voluntary and conscious control, it is assumed being overweight is often accepted as a personal choice. However, we should understand that losing weight is not as easy as gaining it. It is a great challenge to reverse the body image and get rid of extra pounds. Instead of laughing, accusing and rejecting big people, we should show them our acceptance and friendship so that they know that they are being respected no matter what their weight is. Our actions should encourage them to attempt weight loss but not to psychologically harm them, preventing any weight loss attempts and hurting them for the rest of their lives.

Being initiative and promoting anti-bullying will make the government hear us. Just like in New Jersey, where the recent anti-bullying legislature act was passed in response to dramatic bullying incidents and activity of antibullyists, our voices could be heard nationwide. Amendments to the existing bills could be made to add weight to the protected categories. The laws can create safe environment for good health of obese individuals and for any changes to take place. Only this way, through fighting for the change in laws and supporting those trying to lose weight we could create better future for our children.
The Service Project: Legislator Letter

The bullying is highly regulated by a number of Bills and a Law in the state of New Jersey. One of the recent actions of the legislators was introduction the latest Anti-Bullying Bill No. 3466 described on November 8th, 2010. The details of the bill are described on the issue part. Overall, the bill initiates more serious measures in schools to eliminate the bullying. However, the problem is that it does not include weight-based bullying. Therefore, the goal of the project was to connect with legislators in order to ask them to amend the bill and include weight in the protected categories along with such personal characteristics as gender, nationality and others. The following letter was send to 8 Assemblyman and Assemblywoman who sponsored Bill No. 3466

Cover Letter to Legislators

Office of Legislative Services
Office of Public Information
Attn: Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle
District 37 (Bergen)
Room 50
State House Annex
P.O. Box 068
Trenton, NJ 08625-0068

Dear Assemblywoman/man ____________,

I am writing to thank you for your work on the newly introduced Bill No. 3466 The “Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act.” As an undergraduate student at Rutgers, I am currently involved in the research on the subject of bullying in schools in one of my classes. Throughout the semester, I discovered how dangerous peer discrimination and harassment could be and investigated on the topic of overweight and obesity as one of the triggers of bullying among children. My research on New Jersey Legislature laws and bills, including the most recent one, shows that body weight is not mentioned in the protective categories in any of them, unlike legislature acts in the state of Michigan and local rulings in San Francisco CA, Santa Cruz, CA, Binghamton NY, Urbana IL, Madison WI, and Washington D.C. that add weight category to their lists. Therefore, I am proposing to amend the recent bill and add weight in the distinguishing characteristics of individuals in the definition of bullying.

The epidemic of obesity is spreading with a tremendous speed in our society, and is especially vivid among young population. As a student nutritionist and soon to be dietitian, I am looking for the ways to decrease and prevent children obesity, along with my classmates and dietitians. However, out of our direct influence, there are peer relationships and specifically bullying that children encounter in schools. Today weight discrimination is compared to racial harassment as it is 66% larger than it used to be. Not only such negative behavior diminishes children mood and encouragement in any weight-loss and lifestyle changes, but also it impacts children's psychological status. Statistics shows that bullied child develops depression, low self esteem, eating disorders and more prone to suicide attempts. Besides, future lives of stigmatized obese children are getting compromised and these children on average spend fewer years in education,
marry less often and have lower socioeconomic status. All these numbers as well as other important data along with references is found in the research I have attached for your review.

Bill No 3466 will lead to many important changes in school environment, decreasing bullying and hopefully suicide attempts. However, it is important that weight-based bullying is to be mentioned and emphasized during school staff training and other events that target bullying prevention. Only in bullying free environment, overweight and obese children can receive support and encouragement to make attempts towards healthier lives.

Thank you.

Regards,

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Trenton, NJ 08618
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natallia@eden.rutgers.edu

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The Burden of Weight Stigma.

The epidemic of obesity is spreading with a tremendous speed in our society. The latest statistics shows that about 2/3 of adult population and 1/3 of children population have extra weight (1, 2, 9). Besides fighting to prevent further increase in obesity numbers through a change in eating behaviors and introduction of physical activity, special attention should be paid in dealing with the consequences of being overweight. Awareness should be raised to address not only health complications, but also psychological status of big people since they are often the victims of social discrimination and bullying.

Today weight discrimination can easily be compared to racial harassment as it is 66% larger than it used to be. Overweight population is treated as lazy, undisciplined and foolish people, especially in a work environment. Obese individuals with the same education and performance as other employees have less chances of being hired, promoted and financially compensated in the same way. Not only this impacts socioeconomic status of big people but also changes their psychological health and develops unusual behavior. If compared to obese individuals who are not bullied, stigmatized people are prone to binge eating, low exercising and avoiding or interrupting any preventive measures or attempts of losing weight (11). The victims of bullying have lower self esteem, marry less often and spend fewer years in education than normal weight individuals (5).

The effect is most dangerous and frequent at schools where 30% of adolescents are bullied by their peers which is often the cause of children anxiety and depression (4). The reason behind it is because during adolescence young individuals rely greatly on peers for establishment of their self esteem and support. This is the time when they are being transformed physically which makes them more sensitive to peer remarks, and poor peers relationships might result in dropping outs, psychopathology and even criminality both in present and future (7, 10). Thus, bullying is especially powerful at this age, and children with extra weight have greater chances to be bullied (6, 7). However, the effect of such negative behavior is depression, low self esteem and decrease in physical activity since diminished mood lead to lack on motivation and prevent children from engaging in exercises (12). Another extreme consequence is that often peer victimized adolescents think and even attempts to commit suicide (4).

Unfortunately, there is no federal law that would prohibit and punish weight discrimination. Obesity lawsuits rely on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 where body weight is just assumed as one of the individual's characteristics or even a disability. On the state level, Michigan is the only state to include body weight in the civil rights list. There are some local ruling in the California and District of Columbia which make it illegal to discriminate a person based on any individual's characteristics including weight (3). The list includes such cities as San Francisco CA, Santa Cruz, CA, Binghamton NY, Urbana IL, Madison WI, and Washington D.C. (13). However, it is not enough to protect against weight stigma legally, and 98% obesity cases are still won by the other side (3). Regarding bullying at school, there are a number of laws and bills that target prevention of bullying and establishing of policies that would stop unethical behaviors at
schools. However, body weight is not specified as a protected category in the list of students' characteristics (8).

Americans are in need of a law to stop the weight decriminalization, and they are waiting for the legislators to act. A number of Americans would support such a law and feel that body weight should be added to the protected categories in the Civil Rights laws (11). However, waiting is not enough, we as dietitians and nutritionists should promote this change in legislature and protect those who are being abused. With our help, and assistance from parents, teachers and legislators, offenders should realize that losing weight is a big challenge, and it demands not only physical efforts but also strong psychological support, and especially by their peers. This matter should be included in any educational programs on obesity especially on the school ground. Instead of rejecting overweight classmates, peers should show be taught how to show acceptance and offer friendship. Only this way, though fighting for the change in laws and supporting those trying we could help our children to live healthier lives.

Works Cited


