

Joint Subcommittee Studying Childhood Obesity in Virginia's Public Schools

HJR 637

Pursuant to House Joint Resolution 637 (2007), the Joint Subcommittee Studying Childhood Obesity in Virginia's Public Schools held its first meeting on July 11, 2007. HJR 637 directs the subcommittee to ascertain methods of combating childhood obesity in the public schools.

Delegate John M. O'Bannon was elected chairman of the joint subcommittee, and Senator Linda T. Puller was elected vice-chair. Delegate O'Bannon and Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Marilyn Tavenner, gave brief opening remarks, stressing the importance of addressing this issue at the state level.

Speakers

Staff first gave a brief overview of the findings of last year's Senate Education and Health Special Subcommittee on Childhood Obesity, which was established to examine SB 206 (Edwards) from the 2006 Session. SB 206 would have required the Board of Education to promulgate regulations, in cooperation with the State Department of Health, establishing standards to facilitate the prevention and reduction of childhood obesity in the public schools. It also required division superintendents to complete instruction concerning the causes and consequences of overweight and obese students, and the relationship between nutrition, health.

The Special Subcommittee held two meetings during the 2006 interim. The first meeting was focused on initiatives throughout the state aimed at combating obesity. The second meeting focused on local school board perspectives, where representatives of various school boards spoke about the difficulties in implementing healthier options in school cafeterias. The subcommittee also learned of Virginia's somewhat indefinite physical education requirements. In the end, the special subcommittee took no action on SB 206 (Edwards).

Lynne Fellin, of the Department of Education, who is also a subcommittee member, next updated the subcommittee on the Department of Education's obesity-related initiatives. She detailed the implementation of the federally mandated local wellness policies. The policies are required of any school division that participates in the federal school lunch or school breakfast program. Ms. Fellin also pointed out that in Virginia, no competitive foods may be sold during lunch periods, but otherwise the Department of Education does not regulate competitive foods, such as those sold in vending machines or school stores. Delegate O'Bannon and other subcommittee members agreed that they would like more information on what schools do with the funds raised by vending machine and other outside sales at the next meeting. Subcommittee members were also interested in any information school divisions gathered on the height and weight, or body mass index, of students. While the Department of Education

stressed that these numbers are not required to be reported, they did agree to gather any information that has been voluntarily reported for the next meeting.

Joe Hilbert, of the Department of Health, then gave an update on the Health Department's efforts in preventing obesity. He explained that the final CHAMPION Report is due by the summer of 2008; this report will be a five year plan detailing which programs should be implemented throughout the state. At that time, the Health Department hopes to provide funding opportunities to implement these programs at the local level. He then gave some examples of programs currently being funded by grants to various local health districts. He also discussed the upcoming Governor's Healthy Students Summit, which will take place in Richmond on September 20. Nearly 400 representatives of local school divisions and local health departments are expected to attend, where they will learn about recent collaborations between public education and public health for the prevention of childhood obesity. Participants will also learn how both the federal Local Wellness Policies and the Governor's Scorecard for Nutrition and Physical Activity can be used as tools in developing obesity prevention efforts.

After a brief public comment period, the Chairman asked the subcommittee members for their comments. Several members expressed an interest in seeing any available data on current obesity rates among Virginia's public school children. There was a general sense of agreement that this is a complex issue, which will require a multifaceted approach. Public schools have limited control over student's exercise and eating habits, and many members commented on the need to involve families and communities, in order to change the culture that has led to such an increase in obesity rates.

Future meetings

Delegate O'Bannon expressed interest in hearing from a representative of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the next meeting. He also requested that the Department of Education gather any information they have on obesity rates in various school divisions, as well as information on the funds raised by vending machine and other competitive food sales in schools. Staff was asked to gather information on what other states have done to combat childhood obesity. The second meeting was subsequently scheduled for August 29, 2007 at 1:30pm in House Room C of the General Assembly Building.