



**Testimony by the Massachusetts Public Health Association
in support of H3519, An Act Relative to the Treatment of Obesity**

July 16, 2003

Chairman Moore, Chairman Koutoujian and members of the Joint Committee on Health Care:

On behalf of the members of the Massachusetts Public Health Association, I am writing to urge your support for H3519, An Act to Promote Child Health.

This bill addresses the childhood overweight and obesity epidemic that is plaguing our state, by eliminating junk foods in schools. It requires that all food and beverages sold on school property, except for school breakfast and lunch programs, meet healthy standards for fat, saturated fat, and sugar content; it prohibits the sale of sodas and other highly sweetened drinks during the entire school day; and it requires that fruits and non-fried vegetables be made available at all school meals. It will encourage children to make a life-long habit of reaching for healthier, lower-fat foods and less sugar-laden drinks when they need a snack. Eating healthier foods will help children maintain the healthy weight that is needed for a disease-free life.

In the United States today, over 65% of the adult population is defined as either overweight or obese, and more than 15% of children are defined as such. In Massachusetts, 630,000 more of the state's adult residents are overweight or obese today than in 1990. Overweight is defined by health professionals in terms of Body Mass Index (BMI), a ratio of weight to height. Children whose BMI is between the 85th and 95th percentiles for their age and sex are overweight and those whose BMI is at or above the 95th percentile for their age and sex are considered obese.

Excess weight is fast becoming the major cause of preventable death in Massachusetts and the nation, and as such is a public health problem that we can no longer ignore. In Massachusetts, annual obesity-related medical costs are estimated at \$1.3 billion; in the United States, The Surgeon General has estimated the annual cost to be over \$117 billion.

One-quarter of Massachusetts children are already overweight or obese and therefore face a bleak future battling chronic illnesses directly related to their overweight, many of which begin in childhood. These illnesses include:

- **Type II diabetes.** The Centers for Disease Control estimates that one in three U.S. children born in 2000 will become diabetic unless many more people start eating less and exercising more.
- **Heart Disease Risk Factors** including high blood cholesterol and abnormally high blood pressure (hypertension).
- **Cancer** (endometrial, postmenopausal breast, kidney, and colon).
- **Arthritis** in cartilage and bone joints (osteoarthritis).
- **Psychological disorders** such as depression, eating disorders, distorted body image, and low self-esteem.
- **Decreased bone mass** and more fragile bones (osteoporosis).
- **Breathing problems.** Obesity is associated with a higher prevalence of asthma; and sleep apnea (interrupted breathing while sleeping) is more common among overweight and obese people.
- **Poor female reproductive health** such as menstrual irregularities, infertility, irregular ovulation.
- **Social Discrimination:** being excluded or ignored or taunted by peers.
- **Remaining overweight in adulthood:** overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults. This increases to 80% if one or more parent is overweight or obese.

By eliminating the sale of junk foods from schools, H3519 represents a significant step in what must be a concerted statewide effort to address the childhood overweight and obesity epidemic. The problem can no longer be seen as a matter of individual oversight and responsibility on the part of parents and children. It must be viewed as a public health problem, with consequences to the health and well-being of our citizens, and to our economy.

H3519 allows for the continued sales of healthier and more nutritious food products in vending machines, school stores and in fundraisers and will not interfere with schools' ability to raise much-needed money from the sale of foods outside the breakfast and lunch programs. Recent evidence shows that school districts from across the country are selling more nutritious products without compromising their bottom lines.

We urge you to make a powerful and bold commitment to the present and future well being of our children by supporting H3519.

If you would like to discuss this bill, or would like more information on the childhood overweight and obesity epidemic, please call or email the Director of Education at the Massachusetts Public Health Association, Roberta Friedman, at (617) 524-6696 x 103 or RFriedman@mphaweb.org.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

