

## **Ten Prominent Groups Urge Legislature to Return to Albany and Save Lives by Passing Strong School Nutrition Legislation Now**

Fourteen thousand more children become obese every year in NYS. Why don't we have nutrition standards in schools? A broad coalition of health and consumer groups is strongly urging NYS legislators and the Governor to protect our children's' failing health by passing strong school nutrition legislation immediately. Governor Spitzer, Speaker Silver and Senator Bruno have all expressed support for school nutrition reform. Why don't we have a law? Poor food choices in our schools are a serious contributing factor to unhealthy lifelong eating habits. "23% of New York State's kids are classified as obese," said Nancy Huehnergath, Director of the NYS Center for Healthy Eating and Active Living. "If state lawmakers take no action this year, the obesity rate will continue to climb and so will the rates of diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and other nutrition-related diseases that can kill." The American Cancer Society, American Academy of Pediatrics, District II/New York State, American Heart Association, NYS Dietetic Association, Be Active NYS, New York State PTA, NYS Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, NY Public Health Association, NYS Nurses Association and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy are deeply concerned about our children's declining health due to the epidemic of obesity and being overweight. Setting strong nutrition standards for schools should be a top priority for state lawmakers this summer. "These standards must be based on science and evidence-based guidelines and should apply to the entire day," said George Dunkel, Executive Director of the American Academy of Pediatrics, District II/NYS. "There should also be strict accountability to ensure that schools comply with standards or regulations." The Senate and Assembly each passed a different school nutrition bill last spring but the Joint Conference Committee failed to reconcile the two bills. This legislative inaction is hurting our children by continuing to allow the dangerous practice of school subsidized junk food for kids, who are becoming obese at an alarming rate. In Conference Committee discussions, the Senate and Assembly seemed to agree that school nutrition standards should be set through the regulatory process. Coalition members strongly recommend that legislators give the New York State Health Department a predominant role in developing these standards and regulations, as the health of children is their top priority. "We also want to ensure that the standards and regulations are written without loopholes that may weaken the message or enforcement," said Paul Hartman, Director of Advocacy in New York for the American Heart Association.

24 Currently, New York State public schools are permitted to sell high sugar, high fat, low-nutrition foods like sugary drinks, chips, candy and pastries to a population of children that is experiencing an unprecedented obesity epidemic. Many children regularly purchase these non-nutritious items in lieu of a nutritious breakfast or lunch. "If the current rate of increase holds, New York State will have about 900,000 obese children by 2017," said Peter Slocum, VP of Advocacy for the American Cancer Society of NY and NJ. "Since 80% of obese children become obese adults, the long term personal and societal costs are enormous.

New York's Medicaid expenditures alone related to obesity were estimated at \$3.5 billion in 2000." A healthy diet is linked to improved student academic performance. Schools that have switched to healthier menus report higher test scores, lower absenteeism and fewer behavioral problems. "Parents are often asked to feed their kids a hearty, healthy breakfast on standardized test day to maximize academic performance," said Maria DeWald, President of the NYS PTA. "Why not ensure maximum performance and health all year round with more nutritious school food?" Coalition members have noted that New Jersey, Connecticut and New York City already have school nutrition standards that protect their kids. "The number of obese children in New York State has more than doubled since 1991," said Keri Gans, MS, RD, CDN and President of the NYS Dietetic Association. "Don't all of our kids deserve the same chance to live long and healthy lives?"