

Issue Brief: Healthy School Foods Act

New York State PTA supports the Healthy Schools Act as reintroduced in Governor Spitzer's 2008-09 Executive Budget proposal. Several key components that kept this legislation from being adopted by the 2007 legislature have been addressed.

In spring 2007 Governor Spitzer introduced his Healthy Schools Act to the NYS legislature, a Herculean effort to make changes that would improve accessibility and quality of school foods and ensure that physical education and exercise are part of the school day. Unfortunately, this critical bill did not make it to the floor in that legislative session. In recognition of and response to the continuing crisis of childhood overweight and obesity the Governor has reaffirmed his commitment to ensure the health and well-being of every child attending NY's schools by reintroducing an amended Healthy Schools Act as part of the proposed 2008-09 Executive Budget.

Childhood obesity in New York has quadrupled since the 1970's and tripled in the past 10 years. Nearly one in four children in New York State is obese. Childhood obesity is directly related to poor nutrition and inactivity and is associated with serious health problems - heart disease, cancer, asthma, and Type II diabetes. Childhood obesity has also been associated with academic problems and low self-esteem.

Historically, New York State PTA has worked to promote nutritional and physical well-being through Basic Policy and adopted resolutions. Dating back to 1897, positions have been taken urging schools to provide physical education, hot lunches, nutrition and hygiene education, and more recently, to promote healthy choices, healthy school foods, and to eliminate or reduce the amount of trans fats in school foods. Reflecting these positions, last year NYS PTA supported the Galef/Lavalle bill on healthy school foods and beverage options and the Governor's Healthy School Foods Act.

Reintroduction of the Governor's Act maintains most provisions and brings with it a few changes to accommodate recommendations made by the legislature. Funding has been added to expand access to nutritious school meals in the proposed 2008 Executive Budget. The bill maintains provisions to require:

- The State Education Department, working with the Department of Health, to promulgate regulations establishing nutritional and dietary standards for foods and beverages sold, served or offered in elementary and secondary schools:
- That standards to set limits on cholesterol, sodium, fat, sugar, and calories, will determine appropriate serving sizes, and will ban artificial trans fatty acids;
- That fruit with no added sweeteners be offered at breakfast and lunch, non-fried vegetables be offered at lunch, and half of grain products served be whole grains;
- Prohibiting the sale of soda and candy in schools
- School districts to establish a school breakfast program in middle and high schools that participate in the federal school lunch program; and
- School districts to develop local school wellness policies to ensure community involvement in considering ways to create healthier schools, including how to increase opportunities for physical activity during the school day.

New provisions ask the State Comptroller to conduct audits of school district physical education compliance and provide funding for diabetes and asthma self-management education and better community access to healthy, affordable food and safe environments for exercise and play.

By offering nutritious and healthy choices in the cafeteria and classroom, schools become learning models of healthy environments. While the Healthy Schools Act sets sensible standards, parents are not restricted by what foods they can send to school with their children. School environments that model healthy food choices as positive choices can be effective in diminishing the stigma associated with childhood obesity and work to support parents' efforts to ensure their children's physical and emotional well-being.