

Where Politics and Public Health Intersect: Saint Louis University Scrutinizes Child Obesity Laws

School of Public Health to Identify Influences on Model Legislation

ST. LOUIS — As the incidence of childhood obesity skyrockets, state lawmakers are considering a variety of measures – from increasing physical education requirements to regulating vending machines in schools – to get a grip on the epidemic.

Saint Louis University School of Public Health has received a \$62,500 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to study what kinds of child obesity laws states recently have been enacted and what factors influenced passage of the legislation.

“Over the past three decades, obesity has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2 to 5 years and adolescents aged 12 to 19 years, and it has more than tripled for children aged 6 to 11 years,” says Ross Brownson, Ph.D., director of the Prevention Research Center at Saint Louis University School of Public Health and project director.

“We’re looking at what gets a legislator interested in this issue. Is it a question of the content of a bill, political party, years in the legislature, contributions to legislative campaigns? There could be a variety of factors that lead to the passage of legislation to address child obesity, and understanding voting patterns is important.”

Brownson said he also is studying model legislation that one state has passed that others may want to adopt.

“There are positive things being done in some states – Arkansas, Maine and California, for instance. We want to look at what leads to some states having a greater likelihood of laws that promote a healthy environment.”

The research will examine how state politics and legislative characteristics influence the likelihood that pro-health laws are enacted. It also will look at the role of special interest lobbyists in affecting public policy.

“For instance, we would hypothesize food-related industries and interest groups are more likely to actively oppose legislation regulating vending machines or a la carte food sales than to oppose changes in physical education requirements or new provisions for safe routes to schools policies,” he says.

The goal of the research is to identify patterns that lead states to pass laws that address child obesity.

“Our analysis of voting patterns should help us identify the legislative climate that is favorable for successful passage of legislation aimed at preventing obesity,” Brownson says. “By identifying types and characteristics of obesity legislation, along with voting patterns, we feel our study will have important uses for practitioners and policy makers.”

The Saint Louis University Prevention Research Center is one of 33 centers funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the country, and the only one in Missouri. It partners with community-based coalitions and the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services to prevent chronic diseases in low-income, rural parts of the state, improve individual and community health within Missouri and eliminate health disparities. Now in its 10th year of operation, the center focuses mainly on environmental factors that prevent chronic diseases.

Saint Louis University School of Public Health is one of only 36 fully accredited schools of public health in the United States and the nation’s only School of Public Health sponsored by a Jesuit university.

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Editor’s Note: To arrange an interview, call Nancy Solomon, Saint Louis University media relations, at (314) 977-8017.