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SPECIAL REPORT: WEIGHT MONITORING

the student body

Reading, writing ...
weight-watching?
Why your school
cares about your
body mass index.

Sometimes it seems as if there are more body-image issues to deal with than there are actual body parts. Now girls may find themselves asking, Does this piece of paper make me look fat?

In an effort to tackle America's obesity epidemic, many schools are adopting the practice of sending body mass index (BMI) scores (produced via a standard formula that measures weight in relation to height) home to parents. According to *The New York Times*, schools in states including Delaware, South Carolina, and Tennessee ▶



EXPANSE REPORT
THE CENTERS FOR
DISEASE CONTROL
AND PREVENTION
ESTIMATE THAT MORE
THAN 17 PERCENT OF
TEENS AGES 12 TO 19
ARE OVERWEIGHT.
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
MICAELA ROSSATO.

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SPECIAL REPORT: WEIGHT MONITORING

have already jumped on the BMI-monitoring bandwagon. Although the intentions behind these BMI reports are noble—many programs are being implemented to try to stop potential health problems before they start—could they do more harm than good?

Eighteen-year-old Nell, from New York City, worries that her fellow students might misinterpret the BMI report as insulting. “Telling kids that they need to lose weight is something a doctor should do,” she says. “What gives your principal the authority to tell you to invest in a treadmill?”

“I would feel mortified if a report about my weight was sent home,” says Caroline, seventeen, from Orlando, Florida. “Changing your weight is more challenging than bringing up your grades.”

Luckily, some schools seem to be cognizant of the difference. Helen Blackburn, a psychologist at Greenwich High School in Connecticut, observes that although “obesity appears to be a more isolated problem” in her school, “big changes in the cafeteria were instituted in 2006 in terms of reduction in fats and sugar and a ban on caffeine.”

Unfortunately, other schools may lack the resources for such health-conscious programs. “Every day I get the same thing for lunch: a turkey wrap, celery, sugar-free Jell-O, and bottled water,” says seventeen-year-old Michelle of Powell, Ohio. “I feel limited when trying to eat healthy. My school does offer a lot of options, but the healthier ones don’t look fresh—like unripe or bruised fruits or mysterious canned foods.”

The experts say that in addition to

making changes in the cafeteria, it’s important for schools to back up a weight-monitoring plan with adequate counseling and information. Katharine L. Loeb, Ph.D., director of the Eating and Weight Disorders Program at Manhattan’s Mount Sinai School of Medicine, is quick to point out that “without providing a context, [a BMI report] can lead to a sense of paralysis about the problem or, worse yet, misguided or even harmful responses on the part of parents.”

Indeed, the added stress these “report cards” place on students seems to be something the schools haven’t fully considered. “I’m pretty sure it would just give us one more thing to obsess about,” says sixteen-year-old Charlotte of New York City. Courtney E. Martin, author of

Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters (Free Press), seconds that notion: “Seven million girls and women in this country have diagnosed eating disorders, and countless others walk around hating their bodies all day. Schools can

make the biggest difference by encouraging a community of diversity and self-acceptance and providing healthy, cheap options at mealtimes.”

Of course, BMI tests aren’t some cruel state-sponsored joke, and many teens do acknowledge the potential benefits. According to the American Heart Association, in the past 30 years the prevalence of overweight adolescents has vastly increased, from 6.1 to 17 percent. “For some girls, BMI reports would be wake-up calls and hopefully motivate them to change their habits,” says Adaire, fifteen, from Norwalk, Connecticut.

So, would you want your school to know your BMI? “I wouldn’t,” Michelle decides. “I know what I am: I feel good about myself, and I don’t want a piece of paper to possibly change that.” —SLOANE CROSLLEY

As Obesity Fight Hits Cafeteria, Many Fear a Note From School

By JODI KANTOR

MEASURING UP FOR ADULTS, A BMI OF MORE THAN 25 IS CONSIDERED OVERWEIGHT. A SCORE OVER 30 IS CLASSIFIED AS OBESE.

overeating. Since the letter arrived, “my 2-year-old eats more than she does,” said Georgeanna Dunbar, Karind’s mother, who complained to the school and is trying to help her daughter. “She’s afraid she’s going to be labeled as obese,” Dunbar said.