Addressing OVERWEIGHT: The Role of Physical Activity
A Summary of the Findings From a Strategic Planning Summit

Lack of Physical Activity puts Georgia’s Children at Risk for Overweight
Childhood overweight has reached epidemic proportions in Georgia. Recent studies have found that youth in Georgia are at greater risk of overweight than youth in other parts of the nation, with one in three middle school students being overweight or at-risk for overweight. The health and economic implications for the state are daunting. A major factor contributing to the increased prevalence of childhood overweight is a lack of physical activity. Despite well-known benefits, many children fail to engage in adequate daily physical activity.

Georgians Gather to Address Childhood Overweight
To help Georgia address the challenge of overweight, Policy Leadership for Active Youth (PLAY) and Healthcare Georgia Foundation hosted a strategic planning summit to define the state’s challenge and begin development of a comprehensive plan to reduce the risk of overweight among Georgia’s youth. The statewide summit in June 2005, Addressing Overweight: The Role of Physical Activity, convened key stakeholders from across Georgia to examine the problem of overweight and identify strategies that have the strongest potential to promote physical activity and healthy weight for the state’s youth.

Summit participation was by invitation only, with approximately 140 individuals engaging in the dialogue. Participants included public officials, educators, clinicians, public health researchers and practitioners, and advocates for children and health. Summit discussions yielded many insightful thoughts and recommendations. Three overreaching themes emerged from the Summit that will be particularly helpful in guiding efforts to address overweight.

• The problem of childhood overweight has not developed overnight. Decades of decreasing physical activity and increasing sedentary behaviors have contributed to the steady increase in overweight among children. Reversing current trends will require comprehensive, sustained efforts – and patience.

• The problem of childhood overweight must be viewed from an ecological perspective. No single sector is solely responsible for the problem; each has contributed. Multiple sectors must work together to help children and families achieve healthy weight.

• There are clear racial/ethnic disparities in rates of overweight prevalence. Continued on page 2
Accordingly, a “one size fits all” approach will not be effective. The differences in overweight prevalence require targeted interventions that address the specific needs of distinct groups.

A sentinel call was the need for leadership at every level and in every setting: families, schools, communities, and healthcare. All partners have responsibility in addressing childhood overweight. Schools, however, have a unique and significant role in this effort because of the nature of their relationship with children. While not solely responsible for children’s weight, schools are the primary venue for learning. Young people should be taught healthy habits and learn the benefits of an active lifestyle.

**Policy interventions aimed at the school environment should focus on increasing the quality and quantity of physical education in schools across all age levels and improving the state’s capacity to provide quality physical education.**

**Key Settings for Promoting Physical Activity**

The summit consisted of presentations from local and national experts on childhood overweight, as well as workgroup sessions focused on increasing opportunities for young people to engage in physical activity. Workgroups examined the roles of schools, communities, families, and healthcare professionals in promoting physical activity, while also identifying the data and evaluation efforts necessary to determine the state’s needs and benchmark progress. Sessions were structured to allow participants to brainstorm and discuss possible approaches. Each group prioritized strategies identified, ultimately recommending the four-to-six most promising strategies for increasing youth physical activity in the specified focus area. These strategies are outlined on the facing page.

In addition to these recommendations, the following key areas of focus emerged from summit:

**SIX KEY AREAS OF FOCUS EMERGED FROM THE SUMMIT:**

1. **Families** provide crucial support in shaping the development of childhood patterns that continue through life. Accordingly, parents have a critical and essential role to play in preventing childhood overweight. They serve as role models for their children and should project the behaviors they expect of their children, such as engaging in regular physical activity. Parents need to develop and enforce rules that will reduce the risk of overweight among their children, particularly related to limiting screen time, insisting on outdoor playtime, and providing healthful foods.

2. **Communities** can serve as the focal point to mobilize citizen action and achieve lasting change. Communities also provide the context, environment and opportunity for physical activity. Therefore, communities should have venues for physical activity that are safe and accessible to children and families.

3. **Schools**, in partnership with families and communities, can serve a vital role in assuring that children achieve the daily-recommended quantity and quality of physical activity and learn the importance of maintaining an active lifestyle. Accordingly, policy interventions aimed at the school environment should focus on increasing the quality and quantity of physical education in schools across all age levels and improving the state’s capacity to provide quality physical education.

4. **Health professionals** must serve an important role in preventing overweight by incorporating strategies and activities appropriate to their practice patterns and patients.

5. **Innovative community programs** need to be evaluated, with successful programs being disseminated.

6. **Effective approaches** to the problem of overweight require consistent collection and analysis of data associated with physical activity, height and weight, and physical fitness of youth in Georgia.
A Call for Action

The current trend of overweight among children in Georgia is a serious problem that demands immediate action. The responsibility for promoting physical activity lies in the venues for action: schools, families, communities, and healthcare. All settings focused on serving our youth must become involved in efforts to promote physical activity. Communities must provide safe, accessible venues for physical activity. Schools should ensure that children engage in daily physical education and learn about the benefits of an active lifestyle. Parents can establish family routines that help children develop active lifestyles. Healthcare professionals need to monitor weight status and educate patients on strategies for establishing healthy behaviors. Collectively, these efforts have the potential to begin addressing the epidemic of childhood overweight in Georgia.

The summit on childhood overweight was a unique opportunity to assemble Georgia’s community leaders and health professionals to focus on a common goal; ensuring a bright and healthy future for the next generation. Achieving this goal will require a comprehensive, sustained effort that engages key stakeholders across multiple sectors of our state. Leadership must occur in every setting and at every level. Schools are a logical setting to begin increasing physical activity and promoting healthy weight among Georgia’s youth.

Policy Framework to Promote Physical Activity in Youth: Venues for Action and Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITIES</th>
<th>SCHOOLS</th>
<th>FAMILIES</th>
<th>HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raise awareness and promote physical activity</td>
<td>Establish state funded pilot programs for physical education K-8</td>
<td>Shape behaviors and provide leadership for change</td>
<td>Develop consensus guidelines for health professions to support families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish PE Coordinator position at Department of Education</td>
<td>Establish regional leadership positions in physical education through RESAs</td>
<td>Standardize the state physical education curriculum to require fitness portfolios</td>
<td>Address the issue of provider reimbursement for overweight prevention and treatment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DATA AND EVALUATION**
- Fitness testing and height and weight data collection; school-based health surveys
- Ongoing surveillance of factors affecting lifestyles and weight
- Funding and integrating adequate planning and evaluation
- Data sharing and collaboration

The framework below encompasses the recommendations summit participants developed and assigns responsibility for action to the setting(s) best suited to provide leadership. A complete list of summit recommendations is available in the full report (available at [http://publichealth.gsu.edu/play.index.html](http://publichealth.gsu.edu/play.index.html)).
This policy brief was prepared by Policy Leadership for Active Youth (PLAY) with support from Healthcare Georgia Foundation. PLAY is a three-year policy research initiative of the Georgia State University Institute of Public Health in partnership with the Georgia Center for Obesity and Related Disorders (GCORD) of the University of Georgia and the Medical College of Georgia. PLAY collaborates with other stakeholders to identify promising strategies to increase physical activity, decrease sedentary behaviors and prevent childhood overweight. Investigators are Dr. Michael Eriksen, Valerie Hepburn and Dr. Ike Okosun, Georgia State University; Dr. William Kanto, Dr. Paule Barbeau, Dr. Frank Treiber, Dr. Gregory Harshfield, and Dr. Andrew Muir, Medical College of Georgia; Dr. Rebecca Mullis, Dr. Richard Lewis and Dr. Emma Laing, University of Georgia.

For information, contact PLAY project director Rodney Lyn at rlyn1@gsu.edu or (404) 651-2209.

References: