

Title: Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" Campaign

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On Tuesday, February 9, 2010 First Lady Michelle Obama announced her campaign, Let's Move ,in an effort to combat the growing problem of childhood obesity.¹ The campaign's goal is ambitious, to say the least: eliminate childhood obesity in a single generation so that today's kids grow up to be adults of a healthy weight.²

The Problem at Hand

Childhood obesity must be addressed both because it negatively impacts our children and because we know that obese teens are more likely to be obese adults. There is a definite need for action considering the statistics concerning childhood obesity rates in the United States: the rate of childhood obesity has tripled in the last thirty years so that today one-third of children in the United States are overweight or obese. Think about what that number means: one in every three children suffers from the effects of an elevated BMI. Additionally, the effects of childhood obesity have long-term health consequences including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer and asthma.¹ These chronic illnesses cost the economy \$147 billion per year¹ , linking the issue of childhood obesity to the ongoing debate of health care reform.³

Previous Endeavors

The First Lady's announcement in February does not represent the first time the Obama family has expressed an interest in fighting childhood obesity. In March 2009, along with fifth graders from the D.C.'s Bancroft Elementary, the President began an organic garden on the White House's South Lawn, the first vegetable garden since Eleanor Roosevelt's Victory Garden during World War II.³ In looking for a solution to this problem, the First Lady surely looked at the efforts of those around her. There have been smaller movements throughout the country which have been successful and could offer a template for "Let's Move". Take for example, Shape Up Somerville, a program promoted by the Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone of Somerville, MA. The program aims to make small changes that all policymakers can support , such as repainting crosswalks with reflective paint to make it safer for children to walk to school ² . By making it safer for children to walk to school the program hopes that it will encourage walking and a healthier lifestyle. The program also pays close attention to the foods which are available in and around schools, working with Tufts University to make small, but significant changes to lunch menus and cafeteria practices. Through these small changes the program has been able to slow the rate of childhood obesity. In keeping with this philosophy of small changes, the First Lady has said her "Let's Move" program is "about balance and really small changes that can add up, like walking to school when you can, replacing soda with water or skim milk, trimming portions just a little".¹

Changing a Nutritional Environment

The "Let's Move" Campaign is based on four pillars:

1. providing access to more nutritional information
2. increasing children's physical activity
3. providing easier access to healthy food
4. issuing a call for personal responsibility.

President Obama has recognized the fact that in order for a program against obesity to be effective, proposed changes need to be manageable and respect families' schedules, budgets, needs and tastes. Therefore, a primary goal of the campaign is to give parents and children the tools they need to make healthy decisions. For example, the President's Council on Physical Fitness & Sports will shift its focus from athleticism to a focus on health and well-being.³ Additionally, the website "LetsMove.gov" provides tips on eating well and staying fit which can be easily integrated into any lifestyle.² Lets Move also plans to use celebrities to target the younger demographic. The program is enlisting the help of professional athletes who will promote "60 minutes of Play a Day" public service announcements, as well as spokespeople like Mo'Nique and Nelly Furtado.^{3,1}

While these increases in information are essential, the campaign also admits that ,regardless of the amount of information available, a child's "nutritional environment" must be changed in order to achieve tangible results. These changes would include easier access to fresh fruits and vegetables in local cafeterias and supermarkets. Lets Move also hopes to see cooperation from beverage makers with the creation of consumer-friendly labeling on cans, bottles, and vending machines within two years.^{3,1} In order to encourage physical activity, the campaign will also promote community projects such as new bike paths and playgrounds.³ The promotion of bike paths and playgrounds was an important aspects of the Shape Up Somerville campaign as these improvements increased family-friendly physical activities available in local communities.

In order to fulfill the goals of increasing information and changing nutritional environments, the First Lady has gathered the support of many individuals. At the time of the announcement, both a Republican and Democratic mayor were present in order to show bipartisan support of the campaign.³ Additionally, Dr. David Ludwig, Director of the Optimal Weight for Life Program at Children's Hospital in Boston, has applauded First Lady Michelle Obama's efforts, saying that "never before has the childhood obesity epidemic become a high priority of both the President and the First Lady."¹

In order to implement the four pillars of the program, various organizations have been recruited. Sodexo, Chartwells Schools Dining Services and Aramack, suppliers of school lunches, have all pledged to reduce fat, sugar and salt in their meals over the next five years. Additionally, the American Academy of Pediatrics has agreed to encourage physicians to measure body mass index as an indicator of obesity.¹ At the government level, the First Lady has received Presidential support in a variety of forms, including \$1 billion per year for the next ten years, a Childhood Obesity Task Force, a Let's Move website, the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, and \$400 million over the next year for the Health Food Financing Initiative in order to build healthy food outlets in urban and rural communities.^{3,4}

Too Much, Too Little, or Just Right?

However, for every supporter there is a critic. The criticisms of this campaign include its funding, the feasibility of its implementation, and comparisons to failed past attempts at curbing childhood obesity. One of the key goals of the campaign is to provide healthier lunches in schools. However, healthier usually means more expensive; therefore, the healthier lunch choices may be met with resistance from school boards worried about cost.¹ Additionally, despite \$1 billion allocated to the campaign to bring healthier lunches to schools, this is a mere ten percent of the \$9.3 billion⁴ that is currently spent nationally on public school lunches.⁵ The task force which has been assembled to help carry out the campaign is also under scrutiny. Although this task force is composed of individuals from many different departments, all of these departments have many other projects and responsibilities. Because the Task Force's role is strictly advisory, the actual influence they could have is debatable.⁵ Many people also want the First Lady to take an even more drastic stance against childhood obesity. The Center for Science in the Public Interest wants President Obama to remove all junk food from schools as well as advertisements for junk food in children's programming. Others want the government to address the farm subsidies, which currently allow for the artificially low price of chips and other snack foods.³ These changes are met with resistance as they will have large scale economic impacts as well.

Despite the hype that Let's Move may be a revolutionary change, there are also doubts that this campaign will be enough. Previous administrations have tried to address this issue to no avail. For example, the second Bush administration set up the Task Force on Media and Childhood Obesity, which was headed by the Federal Communications Commission⁶ in order to reduce childhood exposure to unhealthy eating habits. However, it saw little success possibly because of the members' close ties to companies such as Coca-Cola (TM) and McDonald's (TM). Additionally, the FDA's Obesity Working Group, which attempted to tackle obesity in both adults and children, only managed to affirm that "calories count."

The current Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children, which consists of four agencies set up to determine which foods can be marketed to children, has yet to make any significant changes.⁵ The Let's Move website bears signs of committing the same mistakes as these early programs. For example, the two programs listed to help promote healthier schools, the Healthier US School Challenge and the Team Nutrition Program are both under the US Department of Agriculture, whose main goal is to promote industrial agriculture, which has inherently opposing goals to those of the Let's Move campaign.⁵ Therefore, despite the revolutionary changes that this campaign hopes to make, the high hopes are dulled by a less-than-successful history as well as the current campaign's dependence on the old organizations.

Finally, despite the First Lady's assertion that "there is nothing Democratic or Republican, there is nothing liberal or conservative about wanting our kids to lead active, healthy lives," any program that is sponsored by the First Lady has inherently political underpinnings.⁴ With Republicans already accusing President Obama advocating big government, the First Lady has been cautious to ensure that she doesn't "ruffle [the] feathers of the food industry."¹ The First Lady has repeatedly assured us that the campaign does not tread on constitutional issues but rather advocates individual responsibility. When speaking at the annual winter conference of the

National Governor's Association, she maintained that the campaign was not treading on states' rights. Despite her insistence, parallels are being drawn between her view of "moderation and perspective" concerning a healthy lifestyle and the President's message of personal responsibility when speaking to Wall Street bankers and the CEO's of health insurance companies.⁴ Additionally, she introduces a pre-existing debate on conventional production versus organic sustainable production. Her lack of criticism of the billions of dollars spent on advertising junk food to parents and children has people questioning the political influences on the First Lady and the Campaign.⁵

First Lady Michelle Obama's campaign against childhood obesity has definitely spurred debate on this widespread and worsening epidemic. The goals of the campaign are ambitious; however, the success of Lets Move would be a great thing for our youth. Whether the skeptics are correct in doubting the effectiveness of the structure of the campaign or if this campaign will ultimately succeed despite past failures to address obesity, remains to be seen. We may not agree on the methods and Lets Move may or may not prove to be adequate; however, the one issue that no one is arguing is the weight of the problem and the absolute need for change.

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