

Remarks of Robert Carson Chairman of the Board, American Heart Association Healthy School Program Announcement

Thank you President Clinton. I'd like to express my appreciation to you and your staff for your ongoing commitment to the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. We've come a long way since we joined forces in May. In October we kicked off the Alliance kids pillar by announcing our relationship with Nickelodeon and its Let's Just Play campaign. And now we launch the second of the four pillars that are the foundation of the alliance – the school pillar. With each initiative, we move closer to our goal of creating a healthier generation of Americans.

Thanks to Dr. Risa LAVISSO- MORRIE and the Board of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We are so happy to be standing with you today. We have truly enjoyed the collaborative process working with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation staff on this program. The Foundation's generous support is an indication of the importance of our program, and it will truly make a difference in our work to ensure that today's kids grow up to be a healthier generation of Americans.

I also want to thank Principal Wright, the students, and the staff of the John Russwurm School for letting us take over your school this morning. Your hospitality, energy and enthusiasm have been overwhelming. As we've already heard, schools such as this one will benefit from this program in so many ways. From what I understand, and from what I see here today, Principal Wright, you have an exemplary school that works to educate and inspire students so they may reach their fullest potential in all areas of life.

We're mindful though, that even exemplary schools feel pressure to focus on certain areas over others. We know the realities that schools face – shrinking budgets and high academic expectations. But for students, learning how to make lifestyle choices to stay strong and healthy could be as important as a history or math lesson.

With the growing threat of obesity, we cannot afford to ignore these important lessons.

We can't expect kids to make healthy choices on their own when they receive mixed messages all around them.

We can't keep telling kids: "Do as we say, not as we do."

What we CAN do is to set a good example that empowers kids to make good choices on their own.

How do we do that?

By making schools a place where healthy behaviors are not just something kids learn about in class. But a place where healthy behaviors are modeled in the environment that shapes the school.

We must look at schools as touch points in a community. Not only do they educate, they serve as neighborhood gathering places, occasionally they provide much needed health services. Some kids even receive their most substantial meals of the day at school. By focusing on creating change in schools we will have an impact that reaches far beyond the school walls.

Our program will set standards to improve the nutritional value of food served in schools; to increase physical activity during the school day and after school; for implementation of curricula on healthy lifestyles; and for staff wellness programs. The criteria for this program is largely based on impressive

work done by the American Heart Association in the past including our Cardiovascular Disease Prevention in Schools statement and our recent Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents.

Good health benefits the body and the brain. Schools that provide adequate opportunities for physical activity and sound nutrition may also ultimately contribute to the academic success of its students. Mounting research suggests that healthier kids perform better on tests and have fewer behavioral problems.

And of course, we all know that teachers and other school staff are valuable resources. They have a huge impact on students – both academically and socially.

Staff wellness programs have been shown to reduce illness among teachers, administrators and other staff, leading to decreased absenteeism and increased productivity. They can also boost staff morale and reduce staff turnover.

School personnel – the administrators, teachers, office staff and custodians – inspire students in so many ways. That's why we made sure to include them in this equation.

Schools that meet the criteria will be recognized with bronze, silver, or gold awards of achievement. Schools that demonstrate novel ways of meeting the criteria will be recognized for their innovation.

We know that there are many schools out there who are already doing great things and will be able to achieve recognition on their own.

But when we developed this program we knew that we couldn't just create standards and give schools gold stars or certificates for meeting them. There are schools out there that just couldn't achieve the goals that we've set on their own.

We're not just handing out toolkits and expecting schools to execute these changes alone. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Our program is unique because we plan to stand side-by-side with schools to help them develop plans tailored to their needs and their student body.

We talked to educators to determine what they needed and how we could best help them meet their priorities while overcoming their challenges. The result is a technical assistance program that will focus on helping schools with student populations that are at higher risk for obesity and its associated conditions such as diabetes, high-blood pressure and elevated cholesterol.

The Alliance will work with schools to give them successful strategies for integrating health into their schools with as little effort as possible. The technical assistance will include training and toolkits, business and program development consultations and ongoing support through individual relationship managers, a telephone call-center and website.

Evaluating the program will be a priority. We'll share outcomes and lessons learned with the education, health and policy communities. We'll make changes in the program based on what we learn.

We'll also call upon our public health, government, and education partners who will continue their efforts as a strong support network for schools. Many of these organizations have representatives here today, including the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Association for Sports and Physical Education, the PTA. These organizations have years of experience in working with schools and communities to address the issues of childhood obesity and physical inactivity. We consider them a critical part of our success.



Schools will be encouraged to involve their school wellness councils to help implement, monitor and facilitate the program. If a school does not have a wellness council, we will help them establish one.

We've also initiated dialogue with leaders in the food and beverage, and sporting equipment industries. We look forward to continuing those discussions to address how we might work together to create opportunities for schools and students and make it easier for schools to create a healthy environment.

I think that this program will be measured by the change created in schools and the innovative ways that schools find to accomplish that change. I also hope that this program is not just remembered for the number of schools that applied for and received recognition on their own, but it is remembered for empowering those schools that never thought they could achieve change attain success and in doing so help ensure that their students are part of a healthier generation.

Thank you. Now I'd like to introduce Dr. Risa LAVISSO-MORRIE, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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