The Weight Debate

Should schools report a student's health to parents?

As if grades weren't enough to worry about, some students now have weight on their minds too. The number of overweight children in the United States has more than doubled in the past 20 years, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Being obese, or severely overweight, can lead to health problems later in life.

As a result, schools in several states, from California to Pennsylvania, have started sending home "BMI report cards." Those schools send home a report of a student's body mass index (BMI). BMI is a calculation of weight and height that tells whether a person is overweight for his or her age.

Should schools send home BMI reports? People on both sides of the debate are weighing in.

Some lawmakers say BMI reports alert parents to their children's health and help combat obesity. In 2003, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee helped launch the first program to report students' BMIs. Obesity rates in that state have since stopped increasing. Pediatrician Joe Thompson helped plan the BMI program for Arkansas schools. He explains that the reports in Arkansas are sent home separately from report cards. "The misconception is [that] students are being graded on their weight," he told WR News. "Just like a school screens for vision or hearing, this is a health approach to raise awareness about a risk."

Not everyone thinks that reporting students' BMIs is a good idea. Parents have complained that the reports damage their children's self-esteem. Some parents say kids also worry that they are being "graded" on their weight. Opponents of BMI reports argue that schools that label students overweight are acting unfairly. The critics point out that many school cafeterias serve fatty foods. Parent Brett Levy from Chicago, Illinois, believes that schools should teach kids to lead healthy lifestyles instead of reporting their BMIs. "Telling a boy or girl [a] BMI is not education," he told WR News. "It's a fear tactic."