



NATIONAL  
ISSUES  
FORUMS



# Weighing the Options

How Can We  
**Encourage Healthy Weights**  
among America's Youth?



Prepared by  
West Virginia Center  
for Civic Life

# Welcome to the Forum

The National Issues Forum Network is pleased to provide this discussion guide for community forums about the serious and growing problem of childhood obesity. The purpose of the forum is to work together to:

- Better understand the problem and its consequences;
- Consider the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches to the problem;
- Identify actions that are likely to make a positive difference and are doable in terms of time, resources, and public will;
- Examine the roles of government, schools, businesses, and civic and religious groups, as well as our responsibility as individuals; and
- Explore potential next steps.

We hope this forum will lead to further discussions, involving wider circles of people who care about the issue and are willing to work toward healthy futures for all our children.



The **National Issues Forums Network** includes an array of civic, educational and professional groups, organizations, and individuals that promote nonpartisan public deliberation in communities across the country. For more information about resources for community forums, visit the National Issues Forums website at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

The development of this guide was coordinated by the **West Virginia Center for Civic Life**, a nonprofit organization working to promote citizen engagement through the practices of deliberative democracy. The Center develops discussion guides and provides training on moderating forums and framing public issues. For more information, contact:

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# Weighing the Options

## How Can We Encourage Healthy Weights among America's Youth?

### INTRODUCTION

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More American children are overweight today than ever before, and the numbers keep rising. Their excess pounds can trigger major health problems, ones that are likely to worsen as they grow older. Overweight youth are often teased and even ridiculed, causing emotional scars that can last a lifetime. Obesity takes its toll on society as well, costing \$75 billion per year in the U.S. in medical expenses alone. In this forum, we will examine several approaches to encouraging healthier weights and better futures for our nation's youth.

### APPROACH 1:

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#### Expect personal responsibility for fitness.

The crux of the problem is that our children are not getting the education and supervision they need in order to be fit and healthy. Eating and exercise habits established during childhood have lifetime consequences. Adults need to play a stronger role in guiding young people to choose healthy foods and include enough physical activity in their daily lives. Parents and teachers need to be good role models and make healthy lifestyles a top priority.

### APPROACH 2:

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#### Invest in overall child well-being.

The crux of the problem is that we focus too much on children's weight as the primary concern, rather than as a symptom of other issues. For many, food is a source of comfort during difficult times, which can lead to a pattern of overeating as a way to cope with emotions. For others, the lack of affordable, healthy food is an ongoing cause of worry and poor health. The media contributes to the problem by promoting unattainable body images. Investing in the overall well-being of children is the best way to help them maintain healthy weights.

### APPROACH 3:

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#### Change our culture to encourage fitness.

The crux of the problem is that our society bombards children and families with opportunities to eat more and do less. Fast foods, electronic pastimes, less gym time, and multi-car families have all contributed to the problem of obesity. We need to drastically change our home, school and community environments to restore a healthy balance between the calories we eat and the calories we burn. Advertisers need to become part of the solution by promoting healthier food options, especially to young audiences.

### REFLECTIONS

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### MOVING TO ACTION

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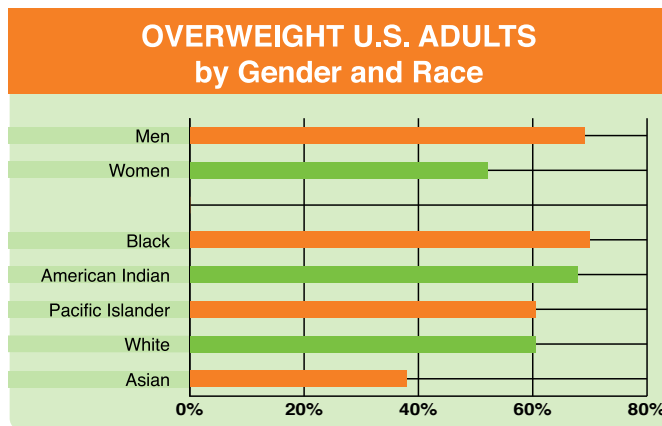
The purpose of this guide is to encourage public deliberation about the problem and what we can do about it. While people have differing opinions on the issue, most agree that multiple factors contribute to our overweight society. To tackle the problem successfully, everyone needs to be involved – families, schools, health and social service programs, community and faith-based groups, government, and industry.

### Why do we have this problem?

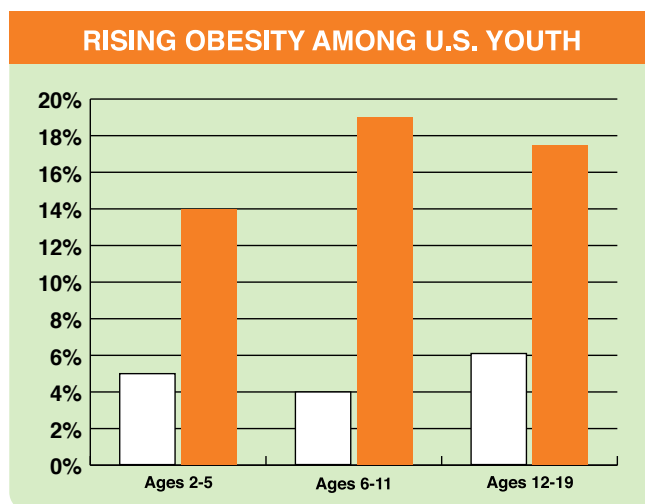
Mathematically speaking, the explanation for America’s obesity epidemic is simple: We’re consuming more calories than we burn in our daily activities. The underlying causes are more complicated, however, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Slow metabolism and other **genetic** factors may contribute to weight gain in some people. More common influences, however, are the **behavioral** choices we make, such as the type and amount of food we eat and how much time we spend in rigorous versus sedentary activities.

**Social and emotional** factors also play a significant role in eating habits and weight. We may use food to cope with situations and emotions that make us uncomfortable, rather than deal with them in more productive ways. Other times, we may eat to reward ourselves or to socialize with others. In addition, cultural factors may influence the foods we prefer and the ways we prepare them.

Another major factor is the **environment**. For young people, this includes the frequency of gym classes, the availability of computers and video games, and the safety of their neighborhoods for walking and playing. Families that live in poor communities are often at higher risk for obesity because they are less likely to have full-service supermarkets nearby and more likely to rely on the less healthy food sold in convenience stores. In addition, low-income and non-white neighborhoods have more fast food restaurants per capita than do high-income and white neighborhoods. (For more information, visit the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation website at [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org).)

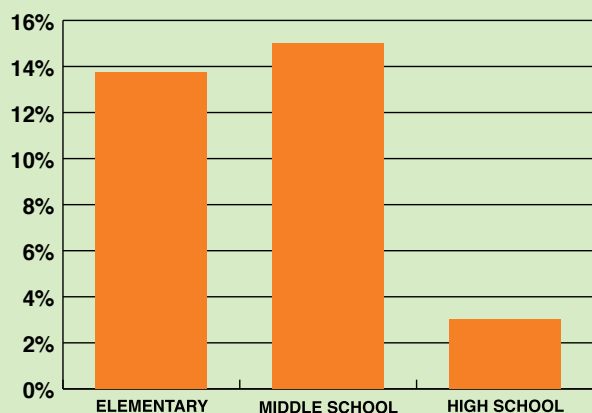


(Sources: CDC, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2005)



(Sources: CDC, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey)

## SCHOOLS PROVIDING PHYSICAL EDUCATION 3 TIMES WEEKLY



(Sources: CDC, School Health Policies and Programs Studies, 2006)

While childhood obesity dominates the news, at the other end of the spectrum are children who don't have enough to eat. Over 35 million Americans live in households that lack sufficient resources to buy the food they need, according to the Food Research and Action Center. One in every six children lives in such a household. Though starvation is rare in the United States, many people experience chronic, mild malnutrition when family finances are low, forcing them to skip or cut back on meals. This has harmful effects on child development, physical and mental health, and workplace productivity.

### What Should We Do?

To begin the discussion, we offer these three perspectives on how to tackle the issue of overweight children and youth:

**Approach 1:**  
Expect personal responsibility for fitness.

**Approach 2:**  
Invest in overall child well-being.

**Approach 3:**  
Change our culture to encourage fitness.

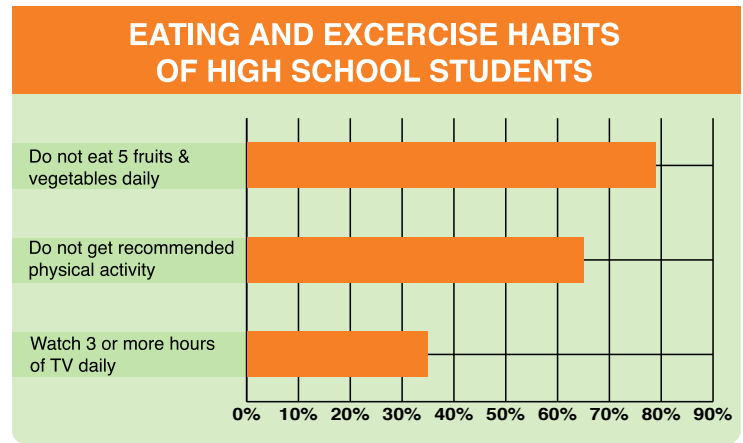
*"The problem didn't come about overnight, and it isn't going to disappear overnight, either. We need to get serious about this and start working together."*

*- School Nurse*



Many of us will see at least some value in each of the approaches. The challenge lies in coming to agreement on priorities and being willing to act on them. To do so, we need to grapple with these questions:

- If we can't do everything at once, where should we start?
- What actions are most likely to have the greatest impact?
- What steps are the most doable in terms of time, resources, and public will?
- What should we expect from government, from our schools and communities, from business leaders and from ourselves?



(Sources: CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 2006)

The forum is just one part of this important conversation. We hope it leads to further discussions, involving wider circles of people who care about the issue and are willing to work toward healthy futures for all our children.

### Learn More *Online...*

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** provides information on the prevalence, causes, treatment and prevention of overweight and obesity in children and adults in the United States. [www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity)
- **KidsHealth** is a popular Web site sponsored by the Nemours Foundation, which provides youth and families with accurate, up-to-date, and jargon-free health information. [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)
- **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** supports research and programs aimed at reducing childhood obesity by improving access to affordable, healthy foods and increasing opportunities for physical activity. [www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity](http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity)
- **Food and Research Action Center (FRAC)** is a national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the United States. [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org)



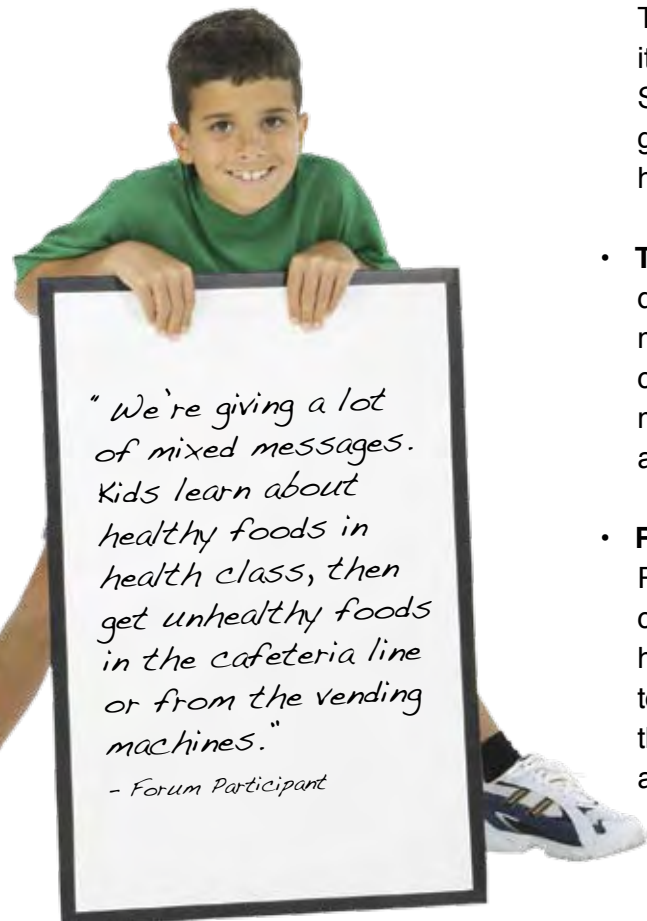
## APPROACH 1:

### Expect personal responsibility for fitness.

The crux of the problem is that our children are not getting the education and supervision they need to be fit and healthy. Eating and exercise habits established during childhood have lifetime consequences. Adults need to play a stronger role in guiding young people to choose healthy foods and include enough physical activity in their daily lives. Parents and teachers need to be good role models and make healthy lifestyles a top priority.

#### What can we do?

- **Recognize signs of overweight and obesity.** Too many parents dismiss their children's extra pounds as "baby fat" or "just a phase." Doctors, health teachers, coaches and others can provide honest and constructive feedback to children and their parents about healthy weights.
- **Educate children and adults about healthy choices.** There is so much information about healthy lifestyles that it's hard to know where to begin and what sources to trust. School and community programs can offer classes that give children and parents practical, affordable advice about healthy meals and activities.
- **Teach by example.** Children learn more from what adults do than from what they say. Parents can prepare nutritious meals and participate in physical activities with their children. Schools and child care centers can serve healthy meals and snacks. Youth groups can sponsor physically active recreation.
- **Reward healthy behaviors and penalize unhealthy ones.** People learn from the consequences of their actions. Insurance companies can charge lower premiums for individuals within a healthy weight range. Schools can require overweight students to take extra gym classes. Parents can make children earn their time with TV and video games by spending an equal amount of time in physical activities.





## What are the drawbacks to Approach 1?

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- Working parents are hard-pressed to find time to cook every night, and their children's extracurricular activities often interfere with the family dinner hour.
- Many families don't have access to healthy foods and safe physical activities because of their incomes or where they live. Most schools operate on limited budgets and can't always afford the healthiest options.



**The President's Challenge** ([www.presidentschallenge.org](http://www.presidentschallenge.org)) is a program that encourages Americans of all ages to make being active part of their everyday lives. This federal program helps people set individual goals for physical activity and earn awards for meeting them.

## What are the trade-offs?

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Would you support Approach 1 **EVEN IF** it means that:

- parents, teachers and other adults have to change their own eating and exercise habits in order to be good role models for children and youth?
- overweight children feel singled at school or home by special diet and exercise plans?



**Farm to You** ([www.FarmToYou.okstate.edu](http://www.FarmToYou.okstate.edu)), coordinated by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, is a traveling interactive exhibit for elementary school children, parents, school personnel and community members to improve children's eating and health behaviors.

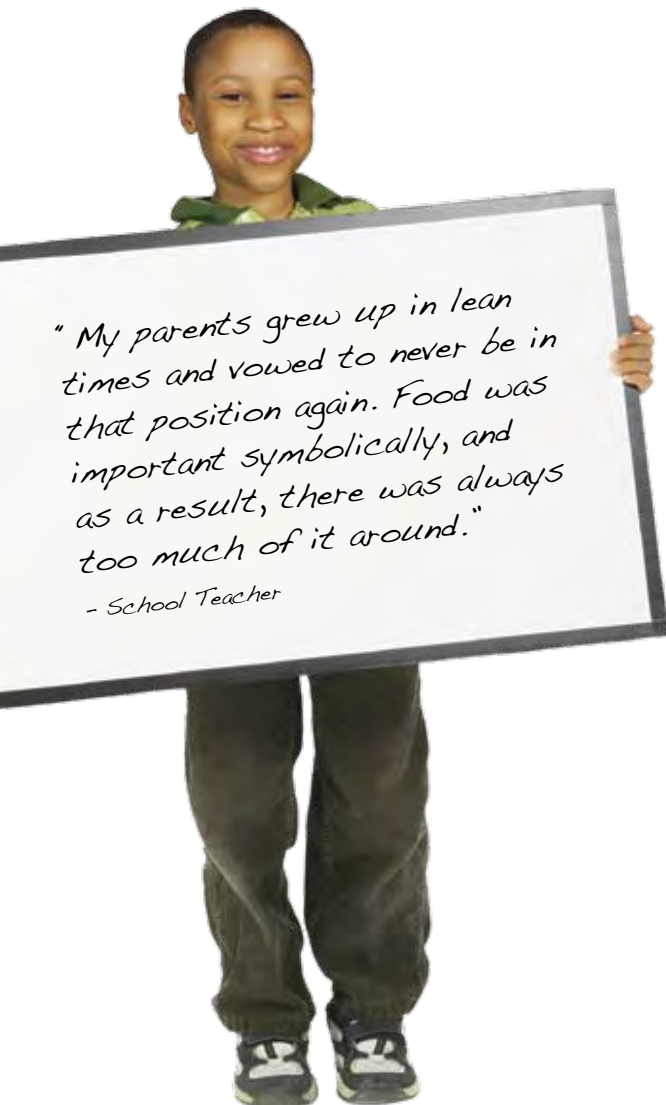
How would this approach work in my family and community?

## APPROACH 2: Invest in overall child well-being.

The crux of the problem is that we focus too much on children's weight as the primary concern, rather than as a symptom of other issues. For many, food is a source of comfort during difficult times, which can lead to a pattern of overeating as a way to cope with emotions. For others, the lack of affordable, healthy food is an ongoing cause of worry and poor health. The media contributes to the problem by promoting unattainable body images. Investing in the overall well-being of children is the best way to help them maintain healthy weights.

### What can we do?

- **Address emotions that trigger overeating.** When eating to soothe emotions leads to being overweight, diets are rarely successful unless people learn other coping strategies. Parents and caregivers can teach children how to distinguish hunger pangs from other urges to eat and to develop alternatives to overeating. Schools and communities can provide more counseling for young people on how to deal with feelings and cope with problems.
- **Focus on food as nutrition, not as a reward or bribe.** We do children a disservice when we encourage them to eat healthy foods and then offer candy and cookies for good conduct. Adults in supervisory and caregiving roles can treat food as nutrition and not use it to shape behavior.
- **Build healthy body images.** Many actors and models featured in the media give young people inappropriate standards for what's physically and sexually attractive. Advertisers can feature "right-sized" models that reflect more typical and attainable standards for physical appearance. Youth programs can foster healthy body images and obtain professional care for young people with eating disorders.
- **Guarantee food security.** One-sixth of American children live in families that sometimes go hungry due to lack of sufficient food. Communities can expand food pantries and do more to publicize food stamps. Schools can offer summer meal programs, as well as free and reduced breakfast and lunch.



## What are the drawbacks to Approach 2?

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- This approach dwells too much on the reasons for overeating and not enough on the behavior itself. Whatever the cause of being overweight, the solution is the same: eat less and exercise more.
- This approach adds mental health labels to children's weight problems. We should avoid further stigmatizing these children or blaming the problem on psychological factors.



**Energy Express** ([www.energyexpress.wvu.edu](http://www.energyexpress.wvu.edu)) offers a summer reading program, coupled with nutritious meals, in many West Virginia counties. It is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Summer Food Service Program ([www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer)).

## What are the trade-offs?

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Would you support Approach 2 **EVEN IF** it means that:

- parents and other adults have to change the ways they use food with children for reasons other than nutrition.
- schools have dress codes aimed at wholesome and age-appropriate appearance.



**Girls on the Run** ([www.girlsontherun.org](http://www.girlsontherun.org)) is a nationwide program that encourages preteen girls to develop self-respect and healthy lifestyles through running. The 12-week, 24-session curriculum addresses all aspects of girls' development - physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual.

**How would this approach work in my family and community?**



## APPROACH 3:

### Change our culture to encourage fitness.

The crux of the problem is that our society bombards children and families with opportunities to eat more and do less. Fast foods, electronic pastimes, less gym time, and multi-car families have all contributed to the problem of obesity. We need to drastically change our home, school and community environments to restore a healthy balance between the calories we eat and the calories we burn. Advertisers need to become part of the solution by promoting healthier food options, especially to young audiences.

#### What can we do?

- **Revamp schools to promote healthy living.** Young people spend more time and eat more meals at school than anywhere other than home. Schools can increase the time allotted for physical activity, eliminate the sale of high-calorie soft drinks and snacks, and require students to take life skills classes where they learn to plan and prepare healthy meals.
- **Create safer and healthier communities.** Children need opportunities for physical activity that are safe and healthy. Local governments can provide more sidewalks and bike lanes. Community groups can sponsor sports leagues, hiking trails and playgrounds. Law enforcement agencies can expand community policing in high crime neighborhoods.
- **Curb unhealthy advertising.** Television exposes children and youth to a huge helping of ads for unhealthy foods. Advertisers can focus on healthy products for young audiences. Families can purchase products from companies that advertise responsibly. Government can impose standards on food advertising that targets children.
- **Welcome healthy businesses.** Too many neighborhoods, especially poor ones, have an overabundance of convenience stores and not enough supermarkets that provide healthier choices. Land-use planners can include full-service grocery stores in rural and low-income areas, and government can provide tax incentives to build them. Families can ask restaurants to offer healthy menu options and select them when available.



## What are the drawbacks to Approach 3?

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- This approach encroaches on the rights of businesses to advertise, on consumers to make their own choices, and on parents to raise their children as they see fit.
- Most communities lack the money needed to expand playgrounds, trails, and sports facilities. Schools may have to find ways to make up for lost revenues from vending machine sales.



**America Walks** ([www.americawalks.org](http://www.americawalks.org)) is a national coalition of local advocacy groups dedicated to promoting walkable communities. Members work to improve conditions for walking, encourage the practice of walking, and support pedestrian-friendly public policies and projects.

## What are the trade-offs?

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Would you support Approach 2 **EVEN IF** it means that:

- schools have to reduce time for academic instruction in order to provide more time for gym and life skills classes?
- government places limits on free speech in advertising?



**Pick a Better Snack** ([www.idph.state.ia.us/pickabetersnack](http://www.idph.state.ia.us/pickabetersnack)) is a social marketing campaign developed by the Iowa Nutrition Network that provides print and broadcast messages to encourage fruit and vegetable snacks.

How would this approach work in my family and community?

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FORUM



In this forum, we have explored three different approaches for encouraging healthy weights among America's youth. Though the approaches overlap in some respects, they suggest different priorities for action that would bring different benefits and trade-offs. Please take a few minutes to reflect on your experience in the forum.


### **Individually...**

- What new information or insights did you gain?
- How did your own thinking about the issue change?
- How did your thinking about other people's views change?

### **As a group...**

- What actions are we most willing to support, and why?
- What actions are we least willing to support, and why?
- What trade-offs are we most willing to accept?
- What tough choices do we still need to grapple with?

**M**ost people who participate in forums want to do more than talk about the problem; they also want to consider actions that will improve the situation. What are the opportunities for action that emerged from this forum?



Moving to Action...

### **What are the possibilities?**

- What can we each do personally to encourage healthy weights among youth?
- What can our schools and communities do about the issue?
- What policies – local, state or national – should be changed to encourage healthy weights?
- How else can we use what we learned today?

### **Where should we start?**

- What actions are most likely to have the greatest impact?
- What actions are the most doable in terms of time, resources, and public will?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What will be our next steps?

