

Education a key to tackling obesity

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There is of course no single factor that has led to New Zealand being one of the most obese nations in the world—it is a multifaceted problem involving social, cultural and economic forces interacting in a variety of ways. But, having acknowledged the complexities of the problem, equipping individuals to make positive and healthy choices through high quality education, clearly can make a difference.

Over the last six years, the government has removed many of the established programmes and policies around healthy nutrition and activity, contributing to a reduction in quality education and in the ability

of New Zealand students to make positive lifestyle decisions around food and activity.

One decision that has received considerable attention is the reversal of policy that previously required schools to offer only [healthy food](#) in their canteens and, at the same time, restricted the sale of unhealthy food. While actively encouraging young people to eat fat and sugar-loaded foods seems a strange way for a government to address the problem of obesity, this is not restricted to New Zealand. Republicans in the United States (US) have announced they will follow a similar policy and roll back the limited restrictions on selling unhealthy foods in US schools that were introduced by President Obama. This decision has been encouraged by the US\$140 million spent by food lobbyists worried about falling profits and has been made despite the fact that since President Obama's restrictions took effect, there has been the first recorded dip in obesity levels for young American children.

In New Zealand, the rather predictable consequences of the changed canteen policy, the removal of the successful healthy eating healthy action programme for schools and removal of the fruit in schools initiative have been discussed in a variety of forums.

But discussion on obesity is often underpinned by the belief that this is a simple issue of personal discipline and self-control. Right wing blogger Cameron Slater, for example, attempted to dismiss Colin Espiner's recent criticism of government policy by saying Espiner didn't understand that it is "the fat bastard stuffing their gobs that is the fault and cause of the so-called obesity epidemic". One of the major problems with this self-responsibility argument is the uncomfortable reality that many people simply do not have the knowledge, understanding and personal experiences to make positive lifestyle choices. If individuals are to be held accountable for their decision-making, they should at least be sufficiently educated to allow them to make reasoned and rational

decisions.

Health and [physical education](#) is the one learning area in the New Zealand curriculum that has a specific emphasis on equipping students with the knowledge and understanding that allows them to make educated choices around health and wellbeing. It would seem sensible, when considering the implications of New Zealand's growing lifestyle-related problems, to place a greater emphasis on this learning area, especially in primary schools where many of our lifestyle habits are developed.

What has tended to fly under the radar is the decision made in 2009 by then Minister of Education Anne Tolley to disestablish all primary school health and physical education advisory positions. The advisors supported primary teachers throughout New Zealand to implement holistic programmes addressing a myriad of issues around well-being including healthy nutrition and the importance of regular activity and movement. The disestablishment of these positions has meant the loss of an important support for primary teachers attempting to educate students in these areas. It also sent a very clear message to the education sector that literacy and numeracy are the only learning areas that are valued.

Quality education programmes are not the silver bullet for the health problems of New Zealand. They do, however, have an important role to play in preparing students to make reasoned decisions based on knowledge, understanding and positive personal experiences.

The present government policy seems to be to remove programmes that can help educate students around health and nutrition; to emphasise numeracy and literacy to the exclusion of all other learning areas and to ensure that schools are full of chips, pies and doughnuts. It is disingenuous of this government to then blame individuals for making poor decisions when they have removed the very means by which

individuals can learn to make reasoned educated choices.

Quality education offers a major opportunity towards developing a healthy society. While the investment in health and physical education in primary schools will not have an immediate and measurable result, it will have a long term impact in the future. Concentrating on numeracy and literacy, on the other hand, may mean that people can accurately calculate their steadily increasing body mass and probably write a succinct summary of their health problems but is this really the future we want for New Zealand?

Provided by Victoria University

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