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American Voters Support Investment in Preventing Childhood Obesity

Childhood Obesity Seen as a Serious and Urgent Problem, But Voters Are Optimistic About the Future

To: Interested Parties

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A recent survey commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Trust for America's Health¹ finds eight in ten American voters in agreement that that childhood obesity is a serious problem. This viewpoint transcends all demographic boundaries, with at least 72 percent of every partisan, ideological, regional, gender, age, education, income level and racial group believing the childhood obesity problem is a serious one.

At the center of combating the childhood obesity problem is a belief that weight management and being healthy requires a balance between personal responsibility and government involvement. While voters clearly charge each individual or parent with the responsibility for keeping themselves and their children at a healthy weight, they at the same time acknowledge a role for government in providing access to physical education programs for kids, as well as information and resources that can help people make their own healthy choices.

Key findings from the survey include:

- Seventy-three percent say that preventing childhood obesity is an important priority for government to focus on, with 58 percent citing it as a very important priority.
- A majority (56 percent) says that investing in a comprehensive program to combat childhood obesity is worth it, even if it would increase government spending by billions of

¹ Analysis is based on a national survey conducted jointly by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and American Viewpoint. The survey of 1,200 registered voters included 20 percent cell phone interviews and was conducted April 22nd – May 2nd, 2010. The margin of error is +/- 2.8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

dollars a year (and this during a difficult economic period in which many voters are largely hesitant to support more government spending).

- Voters recognize that preventing childhood obesity carries a real return on investment, with 56 percent believing investing in preventing it will save us money. That said, more than six-in-10 support an investment in childhood obesity prevention regardless of whether it will save money or not.
- Voters see an urgency to the problem, demonstrated by the 50 percent who say that we should invest more in preventing childhood obesity right now, against 37 percent who say that although it is an important issue, we should wait until the economy improves before we invest more in preventing childhood obesity prevention.
- There is optimism about the future – 61 percent of voters believe the childhood obesity epidemic is a problem we can solve within a generation, and they strongly support policies that invest in our kids and schools and increase access to physical education programs, information and resources that help people make healthy choices.

Childhood Obesity Viewed As a Serious, Escalating, and Urgent Problem

American voters overwhelmingly agree that childhood obesity is a serious problem (81 percent), and also one that is getting worse (80 percent).

- This sentiment is as broad as it is deep, with at least 72 percent of every demographic subgroup in this survey seeing the problem as both severe and growing.
- This view is bound by neither geography nor partisanship:
 - Eighty-one percent in the Northeast, 79 percent in the Midwest, 82 percent in the South, and 83 percent in the West view childhood obesity as a serious problem, while 77 percent in the Northeast, 83 percent in the Midwest, and 80 percent in both the South and West believe the problem is getting worse.
 - Eighty-seven percent of Democrats, 77 percent of Republicans, and 79 percent of Independents call childhood obesity a serious problem, while 85 percent of Democrats, 75 percent of Republicans, and 78 percent of Independents also report the problem is increasing.

Additionally, a plurality of voters see an urgent need to invest in tackling the childhood obesity problem. As noted earlier, 50 percent say that we should invest more in preventing childhood obesity right now, against 37 percent who say that although it is an important issue, we should wait until the economy improves before we invest more in preventing childhood obesity prevention.

Further, when pitted against a broad range of proposals related to health, childhood obesity prevention ranks as a top-tier priority, trumping even the notion of fixing our health care system to make it more affordable and accessible. As demonstrated by the following table, when asked to rate each proposal on a scale from zero to ten (where zero means not at all an important priority for government to focus on and ten means an extremely important priority), 58 percent

call preventing childhood obesity a very important priority (percent responding between 8 and 10). More than a third of voters (37 percent) rate it a 10 on this scale.

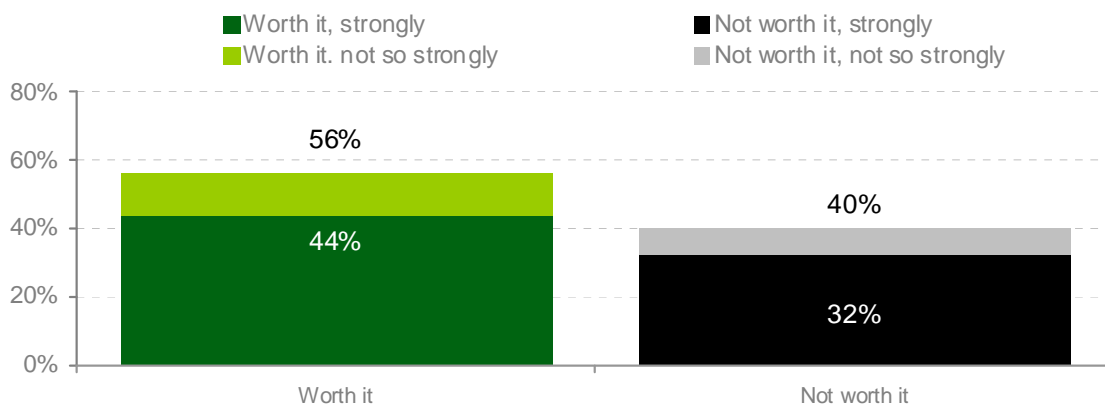
	Mean	% 8 – 10 score
Tightening regulations and inspections to keep food safe.	7.9	67
Investing in more research to prevent diseases like heart disease and diabetes	7.5	60
Preventing diseases related to childhood obesity like diabetes and heart disease by helping kids eat right and be more physically active	7.2	58
Training doctors and nurses to increase access to High-quality health care	7.1	58
Developing vaccines to prevent a worldwide flu pandemic, like swine flu	7.0	52
Fixing our health care system to make it more affordable and accessible for people	6.9	58
Reducing overcrowding in emergency rooms and hospitals	6.6	48
Making more places smoke free and providing programs to help people quit	6.3	46

Now, I am going to read you a list of proposals related to our country today that some people are suggesting government should focus on. For each, please tell me, on a scale of 0 to 10, how big a priority that proposal should be for government to focus on, with 0 meaning it should not be an important priority at all for government to focus on and 10 meaning it should be an extremely important priority for government to focus on. You can use any number between 0 and 10.

Voters Believe Investing in Childhood Obesity Prevention is Worth the Cost; Recognize Return on Investment

As shown on the following page, a majority says that even if a comprehensive childhood obesity prevention program increased government spending by billions of dollars a year, it would still be worth it to make the investment.

- There is high intensity behind this sentiment, with 44 percent of all voters feeling this way strongly.
- This view includes a majority in every region across the country – 62 percent in the Northeast, 57 percent in the South and West, respectively, and 51 percent in the Midwest say it is worth the cost.
- Even 54 percent of people who believe the community they live in already provides a lot of opportunities to eat healthy and be physically active believe this investment is worth the cost.



“A comprehensive program to prevent childhood obesity might include things like building or improving parks and bringing healthier food into schools -- if you knew this type of program would increase government spending by billions of dollars a year, do you think it would be worth it or not worth it to make this investment in preventing childhood obesity?”

As the following table shows, this support for investment is underscored by a belief that investing in preventing childhood obesity will save us money in the long run. However, it is important to note that voters place a premium on health over costs on this issue – by a greater than two-to-one margin, people believe that we should invest in childhood obesity prevention even if it doesn’t save us money, because it will prevent disease and save lives.

	1st statement – 2nd statement
Investing in preventing childhood obesity will save us money by keeping people healthy and lowering rates of disease. OR Investing in preventing childhood obesity will just waste money because people will keep making unhealthy choices no matter what.	56 – 39
Investing in preventing childhood obesity is worth it even if it doesn't save money, because it will prevent disease and save lives. OR Investing in preventing childhood obesity is not worth it if it doesn't save money, because reducing health care costs is more important right now.	62 – 26
<i>Now let me read you some short pairs of statements. For each pair, please tell me which statement you agree with more.</i>	

Voters Want Focus on Kids and Schools

Voters express support for and confidence in the effectiveness of a wide range of policy ideas to combat childhood obesity, which largely fall into two categories:

- 1) Helping our children stay healthy by providing opportunities for good health in schools – in terms of physical activity, nutrition, and education.
 - Expand physical education classes in school and provide more after-school programs for kids to be physically active (81 percent favor; 68 percent strongly favor. 83 percent believe it would be effective; 68 percent that it would be very effective)

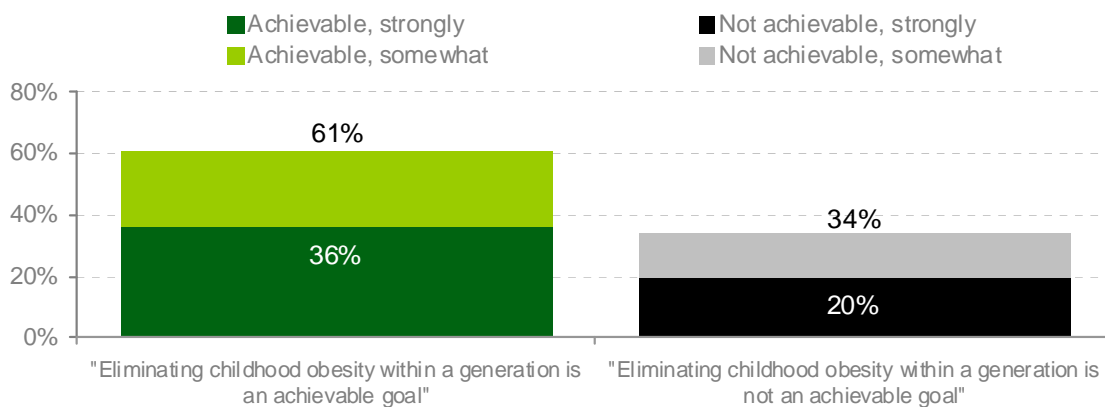
- Require that all foods served and sold in schools meet or exceed the most recent Dietary Guidelines (84 percent favor; 69 percent strongly favor. 80 percent believe it would be effective; 64 percent that it would be very effective)

2) Providing access to information that helps people make healthy choices.

- Post calorie counts and other nutritional information on the menus of large chain and fast food restaurants (73 percent favor; 61 percent strongly favor. 64 percent believe it would be effective; 50 percent that it would be very effective)
- Limit how companies can advertise and market unhealthy food and beverages to children, similar to what was done for smoking (66 percent favor; 54 percent strongly favor. 69 percent believe it would be effective; 57 percent that it would be very effective)
- Establish stricter requirements for labeling nutritional information on food and menus (64 percent favor; 50 percent strongly favor. 61 percent believe it would be effective; 44 percent that it would be very effective)

Optimism About The Way Forward, But Both Openings and Challenges Exist

Despite their serious concerns about the childhood obesity epidemic and the importance they place on personal responsibility, American voters are optimistic we can win the battle. By a nearly two-to-one ratio, they say First Lady Michelle Obama’s goal of eliminating childhood obesity within a generation is achievable.



“Now just so that everyone taking this survey has the same information, First Lady Michelle Obama has partnered with community leaders, teachers, doctors, nurses, and parents to launch a nationwide campaign to eliminate childhood obesity within a generation. This program is called Let’s Move. Now let me read you a short pair of statements about the Let’s Move program, and please tell me which statement you agree with more.”

The survey also reveals both openings and challenges for combating childhood obesity through the prism of the economic downturn, which has had an effect on people’s personal health habits. While 40 percent report being a) more likely to prepare meals from scratch at home and b) more likely to do outdoor activities that are cheap or free, 20 percent are more likely to order from the value menu at fast food restaurants and 15 percent have reduced or eliminated gym memberships or other physical activity that costs money.