The Environmental Causes Of Childhood Obesity: Since the 1970s, the percentage of obese children 6 to 11 years old has tripled and obesity among preschool children and adolescents has doubled.

Health experts have been concerned about obesity in adults, but they are even more concerned about overweight children. These kids will be far more prone to diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and other illnesses throughout their lives and are expected to die at least a decade sooner than their parents.

Turning around the childhood obesity epidemic means increasing children’s physical activity and improving what they eat. While much research has focused on educating children and changing their behavior, these approaches have had limited success. Changing the environments in which children eat and play is now seen as an essential strategy in fighting the obesity epidemic.

Accomplishing environmental changes will require the active involvement of local elected officials and top-level administrators from both cities and schools.

The Institute of Medicine recently identified the environmental causes of children’s obesity. On the food intake side, they include reduced access and affordability of fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods. On the physical activity side, urban and suburban designs that discourage or prevent walking and other physical activities were cited. Also at fault were decreased opportunities for physical activity at school, after school, and reduced walking or bicycling to and from school.

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Thirty years ago the sight of children walking and biking was common – 66 percent of all children did so. Now, however, 87 percent of all trips to and from school are by car or bus.

An excellent fact sheet is now available from Active Living Research located at San Diego State University. The fact sheet clearly outlines local government and school strategies for changing the environment to reduce childhood obesity. These include creating safe routes to school, improving the safety of playing outdoors, creating activity-friendly environments at school, and changing the environment to improve children’s nutrition. Suggestions are backed up by research studies referenced in the fact sheet. Designing to Reduce Childhood Obesity is available for download from www.activelivingresearch.org.

Regions Address Childhood Obesity: The LGC has begun efforts to address the environmental causes of childhood obesity by working with the staff of California’s Cities/Counties/Schools Partnership and those LGC members that have expressed strong interest in taking leadership on the obesity issue.

We have held individual meetings with LGC members to review policy options and discuss the best approach for implementing policies in their region. In every case, elected leaders have suggested involving fellow local elected officials, school superintendents and school board members. They have also suggested bringing in additional stakeholders such as county and city staff, health professionals, parents, teachers, smart growth and bicycle/pedestrian advocates, transportation professionals, air quality specialists, and local farmers.

In some regions, multiple organizations are already working on programs and policies that are both directly and indirectly related to youth obesity. But these organizations lack coordination and have not galvanized around the youth obesity issue. The opportunity and the challenge is to mobilize and coordinate stakeholders and engage them in working together with local policymakers toward a common and measurable goal — reducing youth obesity.

In other regions, the number of groups addressing childhood obesity is few, but there are plenty of people who have been touched by the problem and who care deeply about addressing it — from teachers and parents to doctors and public health professionals.

In rural communities, we have found an unexpected connection to childhood obesity among those who wish to preserve agriculture including family farmers, organic growers, and environmentalists. One of the environmental solutions to childhood obesity — increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables through farm-to-school programs, farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture — also benefits those whose interest primarily focuses on the preservation of local agriculture.
In Los Angeles: On February 9, the CCS Partnership, with the LGC, organized a forum titled, Los Angeles Leadership for Healthy Living. Alex Padilla, Los Angeles City Councilmember, President of the League of California Cities and Boardmember of the City/County/Schools Partnership, initiated and hosted the Los Angeles Forum. He brought in partners from the County Health Department, a Boardmember of the City/County/Schools, Councilmember Dave Doolittle of Yuba City and Marysville Councilmember Chris Billeci.

An April dinner forum is planned for elected city and county officials and school board members from both Yuba and Sutter counties and key members of the community who are affected by childhood obesity. Each city and county will be asked to appoint a member to a task force charged with recommending environmental solutions to the childhood obesity crisis.

In Yuba and Sutter Counties: Leaders in these two counties are breaking new ground by working together to address childhood obesity — a problem they are finding to be increasingly prevalent in their region. Yuba County Supervisor Mary Jane Grispo (a Democrat) and Sutter County Supervisor Dave Whitaker (a Republican) have received attention and credit from the local media for their joint efforts around this issue. Also involved in the planning committee are the Yuba County Superintendent of Schools, Sutter County Superintendent of Schools, Councilmember Dave Doolittle of Yuba City and Marysville Councilmember Chris Billeci.

At the forum, Harold Goldstein, Executive Director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, challenged working groups to explore bold solutions. Over 60 local health and activity leaders identified their top three bold ideas: a soda mitigation fee to fund nutrition programs; public hearings on land use issues (limited junk food outlets, increased access to healthy food choices, pedestrian options and recreational facilities); and maximizing physical activity opportunities for children.

The event was preceded by a press conference where LA’s public health officer announced recent data showing that adults in the City of Los Angeles have gained a total of 44 million pounds in the last five years. “We’ve gone from 14% to 21% — that’s a 50% increase — in the frequency of obesity from 1997 to 2005.” The press release was coordinated with the forum and won extensive print and broadcast attention for childhood obesity prevention.

In Sacramento City: As noted by the Institute of Medicine and others, only 13% of children walk to school today, in contrast to 66% 30 years ago.

To help correct this situation in Sacramento, the LGC held a series of interactive neighborhood planning exercises at six local schools. These have involved local elected officials, school administrators, city/county staff, students, parents, teachers, and community leaders. Events included “walking audits,” focus groups, community workshops and interactive design tables. Through public input and analysis of existing conditions and data, the project team developed a series of traffic calming measures and other context-sensitive design solutions that address the infrastructure needs of these neighborhoods.

The recommendations for three of the schools will be included in a proposed bond issue for infrastructure improvements sponsored by the Natomas Unified School District. To download a report summarizing recommendations for Natomas, go to: www.saferoutes-sac.org/

The LGC expects to receive funds from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to continue these projects in several additional regions. If you are interested in leading a project, please contact Leif Christiansen at leif@lgc.org.

In Sonoma County: Working with Supervisor John Vasquez, the LGC coordinated a facilitated forum for the stakeholders, followed by a dinner meeting for city council members, mayors, county supervisors, school board members, and the local superintendent of schools. Both events included presentations by leading experts, such as California’s former State Public Health Officer, Dr. Richard Jackson, and walkable communities expert Dan Burden, followed by facilitated group discussions that focused on a coordinated regional strategy for addressing youth obesity.

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Los Angeles was an early implementer of city, county and school nutrition policies so the planning team focused on implementation challenges and opportunities.

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Want New Partners Conference Information? The 2006 New Partners conference in Denver was a huge success! To purchase CD versions of the nearly 80 sessions, please visit www.softconference.com/260126. To access pdf files of most of the PowerPoint presentations given at the conference, visit www.cmccg.com/media/handouts/260126/default.html.

Higher Density Protects Water Resources: A recent research report indicates that higher densities better protect water quality — especially at the lot and watershed levels. This is because accommodating growth through sprawl covers more land, reducing the ability of the watershed to function effectively. For a copy of the report, Protecting Water Resources with Higher-Density Development, visit the website, www.epa.gov/smartgrowth.

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