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Michelle Obama's next childhood obesity target: summer break

As part of her campaign against childhood obesity, Michelle Obama helped launch the 'Let's Read. Let's Move.' program involving exercise, healthy eating, and reading during the summer break.



Michelle Obama, Rep. Barbara Lee (I.), and Rep. Betty McCollum help pack Healthy Lifestyle Kits for District of Columbia area children at the Kennedy Recreation Center in Washington on Tuesday. It's part of the first lady's campaign against childhood obesity.

(Newscom)

By Amanda Paulson, Staff writer

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Chicago —

School is out for much of the country, and kids everywhere are looking forward to a few months off.

But nutrition and education experts warn that for too many kids, summer break is also a time when they backslide educationally and fall into bad eating habits.

On Tuesday, first lady Michelle Obama helped launch another component to her campaign to tackle childhood obesity, this time targeting summer vacation.

She joined several members of the Obama cabinet in announcing the administration's new "Let's Read. Let's Move." campaign, aimed at promoting exercise, healthy eating, and reading among kids on break from school.

The campaign will be coordinated by the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent federal government agency that supports such programs as AmeriCorps and Senior Corps.

Its goal: to jump-start programs across the country that help counter trends showing that over the summer, many children eat more junk food, exercise less, and lose more than two months of reading progress. About 1 in 3 children in the US are also overweight or obese, and in many cases eat less healthily in summer months.

"Research shows that academic achievement stalls and, for far too many disadvantaged children, actually worsens if they are not engaged in high-quality educational activities during the summer," said Arne Duncan, secretary of education, in remarks on a press call.

Summer break goal: read five books

To combat that learning loss, part of the program is aimed at getting kids to read at least five books during the months they're not in school.

The Departments of Agriculture, Interior, Education, and Health and Human Services are joining the effort, with campaigns to encourage parents, educators, and youth groups to get kids outdoors, keep them active, and encourage them to plant community gardens and learn about healthy foods.

At Tuesday's event, Mrs. Obama and congressional leaders also packed "healthy lifestyle kits" with books, healthy snacks, and activity equipment to distribute to several thousand children, and Mrs. Obama tied together the themes of service and healthy children that have been hallmarks of her time in the White House.

This "is a nationwide effort calling on all Americans to make service a part of their daily lives," she said. "We are asking individuals and community organizations, corporations, foundations, and government to come together and devote their time and energy to help our kids stay active and healthy – and to keep them learning – all summer long."

Childhood obesity in focus

No one expects such a campaign to solve the problems, but it's another sign that the issue of childhood obesity, in particular, is getting a great deal of attention these days.

In addition to this summer service initiative, the administration is calling for an overhaul to the nation's School Lunch Program, and the first lady's campaign is pushing efforts that include pairing chefs with schools and bringing grocery stores to poor neighborhoods.

"In the past three years I've seen a sea change around this," says Rob Bisceglie, executive director of Action for Healthy Kids, which works to combat childhood obesity. "Part of it is the first lady bringing attention to the issue. But we're seeing other factors. It's starting to hit home in schools when budgets are being cut, and school wellness programs are the first to go, and PE. Regular folks don't think that's acceptable."

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