

Nutrition counseling is a big piece of what I do as a general pediatrician. From the time babies are born, many of my conversations with families center around how to healthily feed their child. With the alarming rise in childhood obesity and its associated comorbidities, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that just talking about healthy eating in the doctor's office isn't cutting it. The importance of making healthy food choices needs to be a message that is stressed in multiple settings, from family's homes to the schools their children attend, from places kids play to, most importantly, the places they eat. And what we are discovering is that kids are eating outside of their homes with increasing frequency. When combined with the fact that meals that are consumed in restaurants often include more calories but decreased nutritional value compared to meals eaten at home, focusing our efforts on the food that kids are eating in restaurants is clearly a critical step in combatting this growing public health crisis, and it is with that in mind that I fully support the proposed legislation before you today. By limiting the amount of calories, salt, sugar and fat and insuring the inclusion of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins in kids' meals, while also accompanying those meals with healthy beverages, this bill could greatly improve the nutritional value of the meals that kids are eating more and more of.

One major concern that parents often share with me is that they want to make healthy food choices for their kids, but when dining out they are unable to discern what's healthy and what's not. This bill would take the guess work out of the equation, as parents would know that no matter where they are in the state, as long as food was offered as part of a kids' meal, it would meet consistent, predictable nutritional standards on which they could rely.

Another common concern when legislation of this sort is introduced is that it represents legislative overreach and is an attempt by the government to tell people how to raise their kids. While these concerns are not without merit, there is precedent for the legislature stepping in and passing laws in the interest of improving public health and safety and decreasing healthcare expenditures. Mandates on seat belt use, restrictions on cell phone use while driving and limitations on the sale and advertising of tobacco products are just a few that come to mind. If you really think about it though, this bill is not in the same vein as these aforementioned laws. Start by looking at our current system: if a family is dining out and ordering a kids' meal for their child, but would like to make it healthier, they have to take the extra step of substituting or adding to what is offered on the kids' menu. The proposed bill would simply flip that paradigm around; if a family decided they wanted to swap out the healthy offerings for something else, as is their right to do as parents and customers, they'd simply have to take the extra step of requesting a substitution. Rather than dictating the decisions that parents make for their children, this bill simply puts the emphasis on the healthy choice. This small change- making the default, easiest option to choose when dining out the healthiest option- would send a strong and meaningful message loud and clear that the health of our state's children is important to us.

My colleagues and I will never stop counseling our patients and their families on healthy lifestyle habits, but it's time we expand our efforts and start enacting meaningful change in the settings in which our children spend more and more of their time. The proposed bill before you today is a small but critical step toward improving the health and well-being of the children of our state; with the alarming trends we are seeing in obesity and obesity-related illnesses, there is no time to spare in starting to take those steps. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

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