The tricky thing about setting health and education-related policy in areas that are as personal as eating, exercise, and weight is figuring out how to do the right thing for health and well-being on the public front, while not becoming Big Brother on the individual front.

For me, the individual front centers around my role as a parent. The last time NASBE did an issue of the Standard about obesity, my daughter was two and a picky eater. Now she is seven and it’s her younger brother who’s the picky eater—while Maddie told me the other day (as she was eying her brother’s leftovers), “You know, Dad, I’m ALWAYS hungry!” When I mentioned this to my wife, I said I wasn’t sure whether I should be happy or worried.

I decided to be concerned and investigate further. The wisdom on the street (or in this case, playground) tells you it’s not weight but BMI that’s important, so I checked out Maddie’s vitals on a “Calculate your child’s BMI” website. The answer: “Your child’s BMI is in the 92nd percentile. She is at risk of being overweight” (their bold). If we lived in a state or district where schools collect BMIs, would we be at risk of getting a stern visit from a school nurse? But what is this BMI really worth? “Just make sure her weight gain doesn’t make a sudden jump in comparison to her height,” our pediatrician says. And an editorial I recently read suggested it’s time to dump the BMI altogether as a diagnostic tool. Meanwhile, our daughter is strong and solid and, though you wouldn’t mistake her for a twig, she seems...healthy.

So here I am on the individual front at the junction of media hype, conflicting advice, school cupcake bans, and parental handwringing. While all this attention to obesity hasn’t yet reached the Big Brother stage, nor has it been particularly helpful to my family, at least not yet, and I admit that thinking about it can bring out my cranky, libertarian side.

And yet...looking at the issue from an education and public health perspective quickly brings out my activist side. Indeed, just three charts in our first article say it all: first, the oft-quoted but still alarming data on the increase in child overweight and obesity (data that is also available anecdotally every time you walk through a mall); second, the lesser-known data on caloric consumption, which tells us that kids aren’t taking in a lot more calories than in the past, it’s just that so many of those calories come from junk food. Finally, I find downright depressing the data in the chart on page 11 covering the percentage of kids who get enough exercise (defined as at least 60 minutes of moderate exercise five days a week): by age group, this starts at a modest 40 percent of elementary-aged students who get enough exercise, then plummets to roughly 10 percent of middle schoolers, and slips to less than 10 percent of older teens.

These issues are crying out for attention. They go beyond individual families to the health of a whole generation, and if we don’t try to tackle them in meaningful and innovative ways, we will not only be shirking our responsibility to our children, as individuals and as a country we will have much more than Big Brother to worry about.