For nearly 25 years, NASBE has partnered with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and more recently with RWJF, to promote policies that include health issues affecting students. No health issue affecting our schoolchildren is more insidious than childhood obesity. Insidious because it is one of the more preventable conditions from which children suffer, yet it has become worse as its risk factors have become clearer. Like too many issues impacting the lives of vulnerable children, socioeconomic status, culture and access contribute significantly to which children are most at risk of obesity. Ironically, they are the very children who are receiving so much focused attention in the efforts to improve educational outcomes.

The childhood obesity statistics are staggering. One in three young people under the age of 18 is obese or overweight, or nearly 23 million children in the United States. The health disorders associated with obesity are well known: heart disease, diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure and other life-threatening ailments. The convergence of a sedentary, technology-impacted lifestyle with cutbacks in school-based health and physical education programs has exacerbated a shift in our American culture from home-cooked meals to fast-paced, fast-food schedules that contribute to the obesity epidemic.

And the problems experienced by overweight children are not limited to wellness issues. In addition to health factors, we know that the school experience of an overweight child can be adversely impacted because of low self-esteem, bullying, teasing, and generally negative social contextual experiences. The problems are sometimes easier to identify than to rectify as policy solutions continue to meet roadblocks.

Policymakers continue exploring and advancing strategies to combat childhood obesity, but they must often navigate a difficult terrain to ensure the issue receives the attention it deserves in the school experience. The nation is in the midst of one of the more interesting and challenging times of education reform, with tremendous energy and resources being invested in transforming our public schools. The primary focus of school reform is on standards, assessments, accountability, teacher effectiveness, and other academic issues.

Although this is how it should be—given the primary purpose of schooling—strategies that address only the core academic elements of education are shortsighted at best and life-threatening at worst. If state policymakers are true to the mission of providing a comprehensive education to every student, they must enact policies that attack the issue of childhood obesity head on. They must search for a continuum of solutions that address physical activity and exercise, health education, food selection, and parental education. Policymakers must promote policies that prepare students for healthy and productive lives when they leave our system.

Our partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has allowed us to support rigorous policy debates and a greater understanding of the issue among members of state boards of education. We are grateful for the opportunity to expand that learning opportunity through this issue of the State Education Standard to an even wider audience. NASBE is in this for the long haul. We are in it until we reach the goal of healthier children and healthier adults supported by strong public schools and public policy.