

# MISSION: READINESS

## MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

# A MATTER OF NATIONAL SECURITY

## Keeping Unhealthy Food Out of South Carolina Schools Will Improve Military Preparedness

### SUMMARY

The retired admirals and generals of MISSION: READINESS are concerned that **71 percent of young Americans and 74 percent of young South Carolinians are unable to join the military.**<sup>1</sup>

Being overweight or obese is the number one medical reason young adults cannot serve our country—nearly one in three 17- to 24-year-olds are too overweight for military service.<sup>2</sup> Many individuals who want to serve are not even able to enlist.

Over the past three decades, the rate of childhood obesity in the United States has more than tripled, threatening not only the over-all health of America, but also the future strength of our military.<sup>3</sup> Today, one-third of all adolescents in the United States and 39 percent in South Carolina are overweight or obese.<sup>4</sup> South Carolina's rate is the third-highest in the nation.<sup>5</sup>

Our nation has a responsibility to help our young people become mentally and physically strong—and schools play a crucial role in accomplishing both of these objectives. Children consume up to half of their total daily calories and spend more than half of their waking hours at school.<sup>6</sup> By supporting good

### WHO WE ARE

MISSION: READINESS is the national security organization of more than 500 retired generals, admirals and other senior military leaders who call for policies and investments that will help young Americans succeed in school and later in life, thus enabling more young adults to join the military if they choose to do so.

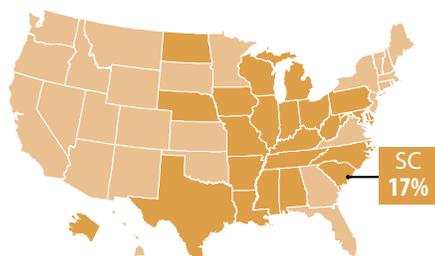


nutrition and exercise habits, schools can help ensure all our children become healthy and fit citizens. Many schools are already offering healthier meals to students thanks to national nutrition standards that went into effect in fall 2012. And starting with the 2014-15 school year, new standards for snacks and beverages have helped many more students gain access to healthier choices outside of meal times.

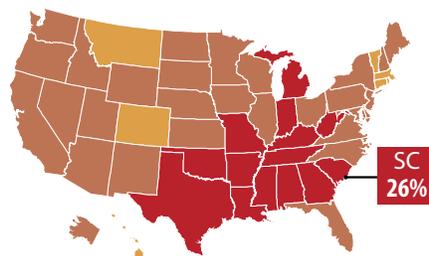
These recent efforts to improve school foods impact tens of millions of students and are critical steps toward giving every child the opportunity to lead a healthy lifestyle and helping to build a healthier nation, and a stronger military.

## THE SPREADING EPIDEMIC OF OBESITY IN AMERICA (1995-2013)

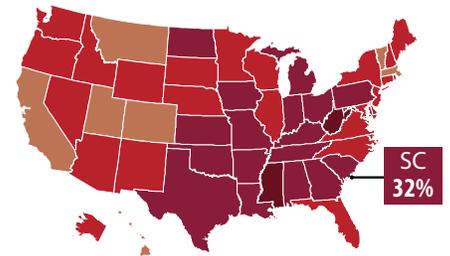
Percent of obese adults



– 1995 –



– 2005 –



– 2013 –

Sources: Trust for America's Health and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



# More soldiers were evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan for serious sprains and fractures than combat injuries.

## AMERICA'S MILITARY LEADERS ARE SOUNDING THE ALARM

Military leaders have spoken out before to make sure America's youth had proper nutrition for a healthy start in life. Following World War II, military leaders testified to Congress that, during the war, at least 40 percent of rejected recruits were turned away for reasons related to poor nutrition. This inspired Congress to establish the National School Lunch Program in 1946.<sup>7</sup>

### A New Threat

According to the World Health Organization, adult rates of overweight or obesity in the United States are higher than those of every other major country.<sup>8</sup> And, in just three decades, the obesity rates of children and teens across the nation have more than tripled.<sup>9</sup> Approximately one in three adolescents in the United States is now overweight or obese.<sup>10</sup>

No other major country's military forces face the challenges of weight-related problems that confront America's armed forces. Today, otherwise excellent recruit prospects with skills the military needs are being turned away simply because they are too overweight.

The challenges with weight and physical fitness are not limited to new recruits. In the past decade, the number of active duty military troops who are obese has increased by 61 percent.<sup>11</sup>

We also know from military research that less fit recruits are more prone to musculoskeletal injuries such as broken legs or

serious ankle sprains.<sup>12</sup> In fact, more soldiers were evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan for serious sprains and fractures than for combat injuries.<sup>13</sup> When a soldier goes down in the field of combat, no one blows a whistle to stop the game: others have to risk their lives to remove him or her from harm's way.

Right now nearly one in three young adults in the U.S. are too overweight for military service. Many individuals who want to serve are not even able to enlist. America needs more fit young men and women to meet its recruiting needs for a modern military, and it is critical for our state's leaders to work together to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic and offer this generation a healthier future.

## SCHOOLS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN PROMOTING KIDS' HEALTH

Enacted in 2010 with the support of MISSION: READINESS, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act has the potential to play a crucial role in reducing and preventing childhood obesity. The law calls for important changes, including national directives to update nutrition standards for all foods served and sold in schools and increased funding to improve school meals.

Thanks to new standards created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, **98 percent of South Carolina schools are now in compliance with the updated nutrition standards and offering healthier school meals.**<sup>14</sup> In addition, as of fall 2014, students gained access to healthier food choices in vending machines, snack lines and school stores.

## \$1 BILLION A YEAR TO TREAT WEIGHT-RELATED DISEASES

The military's TRICARE health insurance system serves active duty personnel, reservists, retirees and their dependents. It spends well over \$1 billion a year to treat weight-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.<sup>25</sup> Many of those costs could be eliminated once America becomes more proactive in helping all its citizens to routinely become more active and consume less calories.



In 2004, before most changes took place, 4 out of 10 students in the U.S. consumed at least one junk food at school on any given day.

and the nation report that they are successfully serving healthier meals to students.<sup>19</sup> Some examples of schools stepping up to the challenge include:

### The Charleston County School District

The Charleston County School District in South Carolina, a district with 84 schools and 46,000 students, has made an effort to make healthier foods more appealing to students. The district overhauled its menu starting in fall 2014 to offer more meals made from scratch. The effort required funding for new kitchen equipment, training for cafeteria workers to learn how to prepare healthier recipes and test those recipes with students and to purchase locally grown produce. Reports show that students are already enjoying the test recipes.<sup>20</sup>

### Georgia's Carrollton City Schools

Georgia's Carrollton City Schools is a district with four schools and 4,700 students, 55 percent of which receive free or reduced price lunches. Since improving the nutrition of its meals in 2010, school administrators report that school revenue and lunch participation have remained constant while students' fruit consumption has risen by 40 percent and vegetable consumption has risen by 30 percent. The district overcame many obstacles; relying partly on whole fruits and frozen vegetables to maintain food preparation time, increasing produce deliveries to twice a week to maximize storage space, and minimizing food waste to help pay for the higher price of whole-grain foods.<sup>21</sup>

### Kentucky's Daviess County Public Schools

Kentucky's Daviess County Public Schools is a district with 18 schools and 11,500 students, half of which receive free or reduced price lunches. Since getting rid of unhealthy snacks in vending machines and improving the nutrition of school meals in 2004, the number of students eating school lunches rose from 66 percent in 2004 to 73 percent in 2013. Success was driven by the district's effort to involve students, parents, teachers, nutritionists, school nurses, psychologists and community members through a coalition.<sup>22</sup>

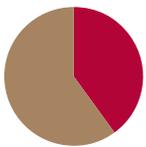
## CONCLUSION

Our schools can play a crucial role in reducing and preventing childhood obesity by making only nutritious foods and beverages available to the tens of millions of students they serve. But we can only accomplish real and lasting change by doing the following:

### 1. Staying the Course

It is critical to continue implementing improvements to foods in our nation's schools. Schools are now offering healthier meals to students and are in the process of removing junk foods and sugary drinks from vending machines, snack lines

**Improving the quality of school foods and beverages is critical.** The changes set forth by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act are badly needed, long overdue and strongly supported by parents, school leaders and health experts. Too many schools in America still sell candy, chips, cookies, sugary beverages and other junk food in vending machines and other venues. The calories add up:



4 out of 10

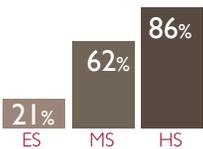
- Back in 2004, before many schools began to make changes, a study by the USDA found that **almost four out of ten students in the U.S.— 16 million youths— consumed one or more high-calorie, low-nutrient foods or sugar-sweetened beverages in school on any given day.**<sup>15</sup>

130 calories

- Students who obtained high-calorie, low-nutrient snack foods in school **averaged more than 130 calories a day** from these desserts, candy, chips and junk foods, even excluding calories from sugary drinks or sodas.<sup>16</sup>

40 percent

- Another study found that **nearly 40 percent of kids' daily diets were made up of empty calories from junk foods, sodas, and other sugary beverages— more than double the recommended amount.**<sup>17</sup>



- Another study showed that **vending machines were available in 21 percent of elementary schools, 62 percent of middle schools and 86 percent of high schools, and most of these machines were offering junk foods.**<sup>18</sup>

It is not easy to change the food that children are served or buy at school. Despite challenges, the majority of schools in our state

and school stores. Supporting the implementation of USDA's nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold outside of meals ("Smart Snacks in School") that went into effect in fall 2014 will ensure that tens of millions of students have healthier options in school.

## 2. Assisting Schools

While most schools across the country are successfully serving healthier meals to students, others are struggling to make improvements due to outdated cafeteria equipment and limited resources to train cafeteria workers to prepare nutritious and appealing meals.<sup>23</sup> In a recent survey, nearly nine out of 10 school districts in South Carolina reported they were in need of at least one piece of kitchen equipment to serve more nutritious food, at an average cost of \$29,000 per school. This amounts to \$47.8 million that is needed statewide for improvements to food service equipment that would help schools serve healthier foods.<sup>24</sup> Helping schools make these improvements is critical to ensure success.

As the retired admirals and generals of MISSION: READINESS, we are troubled that 71 percent of young Americans and 74 percent of young South Carolinians are unable to join the military, and nearly one in three nationwide cannot join because they are too overweight. Many individuals who want to serve are not even able to enlist.

Our nation has a responsibility to help every young American become both mentally and physically strong. Offering healthier choices in our schools impacts tens of millions of children across the country. Not only will these changes help children grow up to live healthy, productive lives; they are also essential to meet the demands of a modern military.

## ENDNOTES

1 2013 Qualified Military Available (QMA) acquired through personal communication with the Accession Policy and Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies teams at the Department of Defense (DoD) in July 2014.

2 31% would be too heavy to serve, according to the 2013 Qualified Military Available (QMA) acquired through personal communication with the Accession Policy and Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies teams at the Department of Defense (DoD) in July 2014. In previous years, researchers found the proportion was close to 25 percent: Cawley, J., & Maclean, J.C. (2010). Unfit for service: The implications of rising obesity for US Military recruitment. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. The National Bureau Economic Research (NBER) study is an analysis of data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) study.

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