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Public Opinion About Measuring and Reporting of Student Body Mass Index

Sarah C. McKenzie
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Arkansans are evenly divided in their views about reporting student Body Mass Index. 45% approve, 43% disapprove

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In response to growing public concern about childhood obesity, the 2003 Arkansas General Assembly passed a measure requiring that school officials measure and report to parents each student’s body mass index (BMI) annually (§20-7-135). Beginning in the 2003-2004 school year, schools were required to do the following:

- include as a part of a student health report to parents an annual body mass index percentile by age for each student; and
- to annually provide parents with an explanation of the possible health effects of body mass index, nutrition, and physical activity.

This measure was one element of a larger collaborative effort between the state Departments of Education and Health to develop and implement nutrition and physical activity standards in order to “provide students with the skills, opportunities, and encouragement to adopt healthy lifestyles” (§20-7-135).

THE ISSUE:

In the current legislative session, Senate Bill 166 (SB 166) proposes the repeal of the mandate that requires schools to measure student BMI by eliminating the language in the two bullet points above from state statutes. Sponsored by Senator Hendren (R-Gavette), the bill was referred to the Senate Education Committee on January 24, 2005.

Additional fact sheets and other education policy information may be found on the website of Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep> or may be ordered by contacting the Office at (479) 575-3773.

WHAT DO ARKANSANS THINK ABOUT THIS ISSUE?

In November and December 2004, the Survey Research Center at the University of Arkansas polled a random sample of Arkansans concerning various school reform issues. More than 400 Arkansans were contacted by telephone; the estimated sampling error was +/- 5 percent. Each participant was asked the following question with respect to the recent BMI regulations:

The Body Mass Index (BMI) measures whether children are at a healthy weight. Recent Arkansas legislation requires schools to measure and report data on the BMI of each student. The BMI data are reported to the school system, parents, and the Arkansas Department of Health. How much do you approve or disapprove of schools reporting the Body Mass Index of each student?

Arkansans were quite evenly divided in their approval (45%) or lack of approval (43%) of this practice (see Table 1). Further, this almost even split in public opinion about the issue remains consistent when analyzing these results by education level, income level, and race.

Table 1: Arkansans’ Views on BMI Reporting

