

## First lady aims to trim American waist sizes

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While President Barack Obama tends his overhaul of the United States health insurance system, his wife, Michelle, is on an equally ambitious mission to end the nation's childhood obesity epidemic. Her goal is nothing short of changing the way a generation eats, moves, looks and feels.

It's a daunting challenge: Over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates have tripled in the US. Nearly one-third of US children are now overweight or obese, compared with about a quarter of Canadian children.

Since Obama announced her 'Let's Move' campaign in February, she's taken every opportunity to enlist the help of schools, food manufacturers, parents, politicians, doctors and others. Not to mention today's youth, who for the first time are on track to have shorter lifespans than their parents.

"You guys are pretty sneaky," Obama told school children attending an April town hall at the White House on childhood obesity. "You'll find a way to get to that bag of chips."

There is no one cause of childhood obesity and the first lady is working a multitude of angles to combat it.

She's visited "food deserts" to illustrate the scarcity of stores offering healthy foods in many neighbourhoods. She's pushing schools to dish up healthier lunches. She's urged food producers to improve nutrition labelling.

Even this year's White House Easter Egg Roll, a hugely popular annual event, had a get-healthy theme — with a jogging bunny as its logo and activities to promote yoga, sports, dancing and healthy eating.

And it's not all gentle cajolling on the first lady's part. The Obama administration proposed an extra US\$10 billion over 10 years for healthier school lunches in legislation to reauthorize federal child nutrition programs. (Legislation pending in the Senate would pro-



Reuters/Jim Young

United States First Lady Michelle Obama greets student reporters and young people after a town hall meeting on childhood obesity in the State Dining Room at the White House in Washington, DC on Apr. 7.

vide a US\$4.5-billion increase.) And the "Apps for Healthy Kids" contest, run by the Agriculture Department, is offering US\$40 000 in prize money to software and video game designers who come up with games that will encourage tweens to eat right and exercise.

Obama stresses, though, that the ultimate solution to the obesity problem has to come from parents, schools and communities working together, not an edict or a dollop of extra dollars from Washington.

"We all have to stretch on this one," she said during a question-and-answer session at the Newseum, the Washington, DC-based interactive museum.

Jeff Levi, executive director of the Trust for America's Health, a Washington-based public health research organization, says Obama's high-visibility activities "make clear this isn't just a one-shot deal" for the administration. Now, he's waiting to see what specific

plans an administration task force proposes to tackle the problem. The task force report is due in early May.

Overall, Levi says, things are "moving at a speed that you don't normally see in the government."

The administration already has put some money behind the effort by providing about US\$300 million in grants for anti-obesity programs as part of the government's 2009 economic stimulus package. And the president's health-reform package has a number of obesity prevention-related provisions, including a requirement for calorie labelling at chain restaurants.

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the private Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, says the first lady was not only drawing an unprecedented amount of attention to childhood obesity, she's also gotten some concrete commitments from groups with a big stake in

the matter. The American Academy of Pediatrics, for example, is urging doctors to monitor children's body mass index, a calculation used to measure body fat. And the beverage industry pledged to start putting calorie information on the front of nonalcoholic drinks.

The administration, Wootan says, is pushing organizations and companies "to make meaningful commitments that aren't just one-day PR hits."

Even as Obama pushes for transformational changes in US eating and exercise habits, the effort has limits.

Asked about the notion of posting

government warning labels on Twinkies and other foods that contribute to obesity, Obama backed away during the Newseum session. "You know, that strikes me as extreme," she said, "because a Twinkie is not a cigarette."

Obama, hugely popular in the US, has tried to couch her healthy-eating message in a nonconfrontational tone that dispels any notion she's out to become the nation's nutrition nanny.

She told the town hall of her own family's struggles to develop good health habits, and confesses to an abiding love for french fries.

"I came to this issue as a mom way before we were anywhere near the coming to the White House," she said. She planted the seeds of the White House strategy by starting a vegetable garden on the mansion's back lawn, and inviting local school kids to help tend it — and eat its bounty.

Of the overall effort, Obama added, "I haven't gotten a negative response from anybody."

That's more than her husband can say. — Nancy Benac, Washington, DC

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