

## TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

### Episode 37: Youth Nutrition and Lowering Obesity

March 31, 2023

**Summary:** As National Nutrition Month draws to a close, this TSET Better Health Podcast episode examines nutrition and obesity prevention in our state, especially among youth. Jae Morrison of the Oklahoma State Department of Health discusses findings in the state's newly released Obesity Prevention Plan, and what we can take from it for our own well-being. Listeners also will hear from Christy White, the innovative child nutrition director of Hinton Public Schools who explained how and why healthy food options have become popular among students in her rural western Oklahoma district. And we visited Jenks Middle School, where students joined thousands statewide on March 22 in participating in the Swap Up Day of Action, a hands-on nutrition education day.

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#### **[Theme music]**

**James Tyree:** Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is your host James Tyree, senior health communication consultant at TSET.

**Dylan Jasna:** And I am Dylan Jasna, a TSET Health Communication manager. Our last two episodes delved into tobacco-related subjects, but this month we are going to swap up the conversation and sink our teeth into nutrition and obesity prevention. The topic can be fun because many nutritious foods are delicious and a pleasure to eat. But it's also serious because unhealthy eating, along with lack of physical activity, often contributes to obesity. Oklahoma has a high rate of obesity, which can lead to serious illnesses like Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

**J. Tyree:** Healthy eating is important at every age, but it's especially true for kids and teens with rapidly growing bodies, who are developing habits that can last a lifetime. But like you said, Dylan, really can be fun and delicious. That's what students are learning in Hinton, Oklahoma, and we will hear how from that school district's child nutrition director.

**D. Jasna:** And thousands of students throughout the state learned this recently on the Swap Up Day of Action. We'll talk more about that special day on March 22, and hear directly from students and staff at Jenks Middle School who participated that day.

**J. Tyree:** But let's begin by getting the bigger picture of nutrition, physical activity and obesity prevention in our state by hearing from our first guest from the Oklahoma State Department of Health.

**Jae Morrison:** I'm Jae Morrison. I'm the obesity prevention consultant at the Health Department.

J. Tyree: Obesity prevention; great. How are we doing in that area?

J. Morrison: (1:44) Okay. James, I am not going to sugarcoat it. Oklahoma is not great. We're at the bottom in a number of health rankings, but that just means that we have the spotlight on it now. We are focused on changing that.

J Tyree: I understand the state Health Department is doing that with the newly released state Obesity Prevention Plan. What, exactly, is it and is *in* it?

J. Morrison: (0:32) The State Obesity Plan is a detailed roadmap for reducing obesity in children and adults in Oklahoma. The plan addresses everything from the social determinants of health, like economic stability and education access, all the way up to policy change. It contains over 30 goals, 114 smart objectives, and was developed by representatives from agencies and organizations all over Oklahoma.

J. Tyree: What are a few specifics?

J. Morrison: (near 2:00) Our numbers from the WIC participant program survey and the National Survey of Children's Health show we have a lot of catching up to do. Specifically, we have a lot of work to do in the areas of built environment, that's where the gap is the largest between us and the national average. Built environment is things like parks, sidewalks, making areas more walkable and accessible, also connecting them to points of interest across the city. That's where really the largest discrepancy is. But across the board in nutrition, access to health, to healthy foods and healthcare, we have a little bit of catching up to do.

(1:11) So this report shows how Oklahoma's agencies and stakeholders are working to reduce obesity and, more importantly, what they can do to help. That can range from getting covered by SoonerCare, smoking cessation, or accessing mental health services when and where necessary, it also gives tips on how to do those.

J. Tyree: I'm a glass half-full type of guy, so does the report have any encouraging news for our state?

J. Morrison: (3:01) Okay. There is a little bit of good news. Obesity prevalence among 2 to 4 year olds and among 10 to 17 year olds is well below the national average, as well as our physical activity participation for school-aged children. So in the area of schools, we are doing okay. There's some supplemental areas that would really boost those numbers that we're looking at improving. But there are some bright spots, it ain't all bad.

But as far as other areas we need to work on, like I said, access to healthy foods, of course, built environment, nutrition access. A big focus is breastfeeding rates, and another big focus is weight stigma. So, weight stigma impacts how we address health from your healthcare providers to schools, to just families, how we talk about health. All of that factors into a culture of obesity that we're looking to change.

J. Tyree: Jae, what do you mean by weight stigma?

J. Morrison: (4:10) So if anyone is unfamiliar with weight stigma, weight stigma is the inherent or perceived bias of interacting with individuals who may be obese or overweight. That can show up with your provider as not being diagnosed always, or that can show up with your school counselor as chalking up depression to obesity instead of flipping that the other way around. So, we really are just trying to find where weight stigma is influencing negative health outcomes or negative provider outcomes and addressing those areas.

J. Tyree: Two nutritional factors that can lead to obesity is lack of time and lack of money. We're stretched for time and money is tight, so we grab what's cheap and convenient – which can result in eating too much junk or fast food. Do you have any practical tips for addressing this dilemma?

J. Morrison: (4:59) Yeah, it's interesting we touched on this today because that is a great question for my current stage of life, I have a three-month-old and there's not a lot of time or money. So eating healthy is more of a challenge than it has been at other stages in my life. So a couple tips. The first of course is meal prepping. If you can dedicate a chunk of time to just prepping all of your meals for the week, it makes getting access to that healthy food easier. Another thing is to be mindful of when, where, what and why we are eating. So when, for example, if we're having late night snacks like continuously, that may be an area where we need to adjust and maybe have healthier food if we're going to snack late night. Where, are we snacking while we're watching TV, because we tend to then zone out and overeat.

(6:53) And of course I know it's nutrition month, but I don't want to leave out physical activity because as I always say, you can't outrun the kitchen. So for physical activity, trying to increase your access to parks and trails, going to them on the weekend or it doesn't have to be a 2, 3 hour thing, 30 minutes walking around the park one time is great. Getting a physical is a great place to start. Sometimes your nutrition journey or your health journey can be hamstrung or just taken off track by not knowing that there's a condition that needs to be addressed. So, that's a good place to start as well. And then find someone you can partner with, whether that's in your nutrition journey or your physical activity journey. That is important.

J. Tyree: You mentioned the importance of meal planning and prepping for the week. Someone can hear this and say, and think, "I don't have time for that; I'm too busy." But over the long run, it can actually save you both time and money.

J. Morrison: (7:55) Yeah. And if you think about it, it probably takes just for the average meal, 30 minutes to an hour every day. And if you add that up over the course of the week, that is an extended period of time versus two hours or two and a half hours one day a week and then you can reduce that time for the other days to 15 minutes to warm up those meals.

J. Tyree: How and where can anyone access the State Obesity Prevention Plan for themselves?

J. Morrison: (10:00) On the State Department of Health website, under the Community Outreach and Community Development Services page, at the very bottom you'll be able to scroll and

you can find the Obesity Prevention Plan, it's a PDF document. It is a pretty good read. It's not just all data, we encourage Oklahomans to get physically active, eat right. We provide links to resources on that as well and information about what could be impacting your health. Part of changing the problem is knowing about the problem, and this is a document that can help you do that.

J. Tyree: The website is health.ok.gov, go to the Health Education tab on top, and that's where you can find the Community Outreach resources. DO you have a final takeaway that you want people to remember about the obesity prevention plan and its purpose?

J. Morrison: (8:52) Absolutely. So there is, the message we really want you to know is we see all Oklahomans, no matter where you are in your health journey. We know that Oklahoma policy systems, environments haven't always been conducive to good health and we are working to fix that and improve that every day. From the Healthcare Authority... I mean, we have partnerships with just about every agency, Healthcare Authority, Department of Education, Human Services. So we are interconnecting with other services to make sure we are touching on those wide-reaching things, those policy systems and environment to impact every Oklahoman in a way that is going to change those numbers.

(music)

J. Tyree: Obesity prevention includes several important factors, but it starts with nutrition – and healthy eating is particularly important for kids and teens. TSET developed the Swap Up program to help youth in our state make good nutritional choices, and our man Dylan is heavily involved with that campaign. Can you tell us more about it?

D. Jasna (TYPE HERE WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY ABOUT SWAP UP, ENDING WITH A MENTION OF SWAP UP DAY)

J. Tyree: So what happened on Swap Up Day? About how many participated and what did it involve?

D. Jasna: (your response here)

One of the participating schools was Jenks Middle School, where hundreds of students took turns to participate throughout the day. The school nurse there is Heather Hoffhines, and she organized the successful event.

Heather, why did you want your school to participate in Swap Up Day?

H Hoffhines: (00:25) Well, I get the emails from TSET and from the health department, and I saw that they had a Swap Up Day, and I had seen that campaign through TSET, and I thought it was an amazing idea to try to hook younger people and even adults, really, and try to get them to eat healthier. I saw that, and then I saw what they were giving away, this great amazing set of the tablecloth and the table tents and all of the money for the food. I thought, "Well, if there's any way that we could pull it off, why not? It's a great opportunity to educate the kids at the middle school." I applied, and then I knew that we had the most amazing librarians at the school and most amazing administrators that

would help make it happen. Then I sent emails and immediately everyone jumped on board, and it became an exciting event that we were going to have.

D. Jasna: What do you hope the students will remember from this day and get out of it? Not just for today, but also going forward as they continue to grow into adulthood.

H. Hoffhines: (1:32) Well, what I hope is that the message that you can choose how you want to feel every day by your food choices, I hope that message sticks with them so that as they go into every day at school and go anywhere, to fast food restaurants, that there's a little message in the back of their brain that says, "Wait, how do I want to feel later on today?" Instead of just, "How do I feel in the moment?" Because what we eat is really going to predict how we're going to feel as we go through the rest of our day. We see a lot of students that have a hard time making it through the day. They're sluggish, they feel tired, they might feel dehydrated. I hope that this will make it very clear that we can really, for the most part, choose how we want to feel for the rest of our day.

D. Jasna: That is good to know at any age, but why do you think it is critical for middle school-aged students to learn these lessons?

H. Hoffhines: (2:35) Well, at this age, kids are choosing what they eat a lot more than their parents are choosing what they eat. Because instead of a lot of meals at home, they're having meals at school, but they are also going out with friends. They're going over to friends' houses, they're in a lot of situations where they're making their own choices. Instead of having food that they're choosing from at home from their parents, now they're making those choices and those purchases even.

D. Jasna: The nutritional messaging for youth go beyond one day, it also includes videos and advertising that many Oklahomans have seen over the past year. Do you have a personal favorite?

H. Hoffhines: (3:18) The one that sticks in my mind, there is a teenage boy who has, I think a basketball or some kind of ball in his hand, and he's basically talking to his future self and he's saying, "How do I want to feel?" Then he's making a choice between nachos and a healthy snack because he's active and he plays sports, and he knows that if he chooses to have the nachos with all of the loaded and processed ingredients, that it's going to make him not feel as good when he plays later that day. That one has kind of stuck with me. It's one of my favorites.

D. Jasna: It was great to meet and interact with not only Heather and teachers at Jenks Middle School, but also with a few students like Trinnen Young, who enjoyed the snack station on Swap Up Day.

T. Young: (00:19) I like how they have, what do you want to be? Do you want to be happy, energized, things like that. And then you get the fruit or the type of food to eat. That was pretty cool. I liked the magnets that they give you.

D. Jasna: What kind of magnets?

- T. Young: (00:34) The magnets, they have different food that you could eat together like banana and peanut butter, bell peppers and hummus, and things like that are pretty good, healthy choices.
- D. Jasna: What is a healthy food swap that you would make, Trinnen?
- T. Young: (1:27) I would say maybe if I want chips, I would get maybe low fat options, maybe peanuts or crackers, something that's way more healthier than the choice that I wanted. So yeah, I would say chips, I would do crackers.
- D. Jasna: Do snacks like peanuts, cracks and fruit make you feel better?
- T. Young: (1:50) Yeah, actually it does. I know that I'm eating healthier, and it makes me feel good, and I know I'm helping my body.
- D. Jasna: Among other students we met was Calleigh Tucker, who depends on healthy foods to fuel her physical activity.
- C. Tucker: (00:31) Well, to me, I'm a dancer and I need to make sure I stay healthy. So I eat a lot of fruit and make sure it's a good amount. I don't eat too much or not enough. And nuts is a good one too.
- D. Jasna: What are your go-to snacks to keep you moving?
- C. Tucker: (1:11) Well, at lunch, I bring these little containers full of apples, and I eat a lot of those. But at home when I kind of want something sweet, I eat the little fruit cups, and mandarin oranges, or tropical fruit, and I just eat grapes and stuff like that, that I can just throw them in my mouth.
- D. Jasna: It sounds like you already know a lot about the importance of healthy eating and physical activity. But have you learned anything new during the Swap Up Day of Action?
- C. Tucker: (1:46) Yes, I learned a lot of things today. I didn't know that energy drinks could pull you up and then drag you down, and I didn't know that there's a lot of foods that could just make you just not happy or stuff like that.
- D. Jasna: And what was your favorite activity today?
- C. Tucker: (2:52) I personally like the card game, because it puts all the food in their categories and it just teaches a lot about what food are bad and what's good.
- D. Jasna: Any brief wrap up you want to say about Swap Up Day and/or the Swap Up program in general.  
(music)
- J. Tyree: Congratulations to you, Dylan, and everyone who planned or participated in Swap Up Day of Action and I'm glad the messaging continues. But now let's meet someone for whom child nutrition has become not only a job, but also a passion – one that benefits hundreds of students every school day.

C. White: (00:10) My name's Christy White and I'm the Child Nutrition Director for Hinton Public Schools. So this is my third school year with being with Child Nutrition. I became interested when the superintendent, which is super awesome and so supportive of our program, asked me to dive into the department a little and do some investigating of how can we make this program better. They had been with the food service company for many years and although they did a great job and provided great meals that met state and federal guidelines, I seen right away that there was something lacking. Education was lacking.

J. Tyree: Education? How so?

C. White: (00:59) ~~And so she encouraged me to come on board and take over the program. And after digging into it, I found a passion for child nutrition.~~ So I look at the lunchroom as my classroom. And with that being said, we are the only classroom in the district that has the potential to reach all students. So we try to make it a fun place to come and eat and rest and conversate and learn a little nutrition facts along the way. We always have something fun going on in the lunchroom and from new menu items to learning that Oklahoma state vegetable is a watermelon. We have a lot of fun and I'm so glad that life brought me to Child Nutrition.

J. Tyree: That sounds pretty cool. What else is happening?

C. White: (2:00) So this year we have made several exciting changes. We incorporated Meatless Mondays and Fresh Fruit Fridays. Meatless Mondays I felt was really important because at the time we were just coming back from COVID and we were seeing the highest meat prices I've ever seen in my lifetime. So I figured we have a lot of lower income students and some may not be seeing as much meat on their dinner plates in the evenings. And I wanted to make sure that they knew you do not have to have meat on your plate to make it a nutritious meal. So we incorporated that and the kids are loving it. They have a lot of the same foods that they're used to eating and we're making most of our food from scratch now. We have a nutrition class for seventh grade that is an elective class and we teach it every afternoon and it's now the elective that every kid wants in and we have a waiting list for the next semesters.

J. Tyree: That is pretty interesting. Do you have anything coming up for the kids this spring?

C. White: (3:31) ~~So that is pretty awesome.~~ Last year we put on our first annual Comet Cafe farmer's market where we transformed our cafeteria to a farmer's market and the kids got to come down. Elementary, middle school kids got to come down, get some samples of fruit and vegetables, take some home and learn some interesting facts about them. And we're really looking forward to our next one. It's in April. And I love to tell everybody in our cafeteria, we play with our food, we sample food, we experiment. Because I love to have fun and learning is so fun.

J. Tyree: Do you and your staff try to get students to try new healthy foods that they may enjoy?

C. White: (4:12) Oh my goodness. We do. We've done Chinese food and they're loving it. We have Taco Tuesday, every Tuesday. I know lots of schools do that, but we have Taco Tuesdays

on Tuesdays, but on Mondays, like we've done chef salads with eggs, without meat, with hummus, and it took them, a couple tries to try out the hummus and guacamole. Oh my goodness. Once they tried it, we make it now every Tuesday, fresh guacamole for every student because they have to have it with their tacos because they've discovered, hey, that's pretty good. But they love Fettuccine Alfredo and of course cheese pizza, but we have our own spin of cheese pizza where we do a taco pizza with some beans and they love it. They love having something different all the time.

J. Tyree: That sounds like a lot of fun, but I also know you and your staff take child nutrition seriously. What are your primary objectives in serving your students well??

C. White: (7:19) ~~We are trying our best to,~~ I tell my girls all the time, our No. 1 job is to feed kids and not only just feed them but feed them nutritious meals. Our number two is to introduce them to foods. And I would've never tried, I had never tried a garbanzo bean until I got into this industry and I'm like, I want my kids to graduate high school from Hinton and never be in that position where they're like, oh, I've never tried that. I want them to be like, Hey, I've tried that. I don't like it or I've tried that and it's really good. And it's our job. If we're not going to introduce them, they may never be introduced because some people don't like fruits and vegetables and so in return, their kids never get exposed to it.

J Tyree: Do you have any tips or words of advice for parents and caretakers who want their own kids to eat healthier?

C. White: (8:59) Well, I mean, be the example. That sounds simple, right? You can't unfortunately eat a candy bar in front of them and offer them an apple because they're going to beg you for your candy bar. So you have to be the example and make healthy, smart choices yourself. And maybe if they don't like that apple, next time you introduce it to them, introduce them to it with peanut butter because kids love peanut butter. And when you put it with an apple, it is amazing and just as good as a candy bar and make food fun and tasteful. And be cheerful and energetic about making healthy choices and encourage them to try new fruits and vegetables. Then skip to ...

(10:23) Another thing that helps is to make healthy choices when at the grocery store. Instead of buying the fruit snack that's loaded with added sugar and colorings, pay the extra dollar, get the one with no added sugar and colored with real fruit and vegetables. My husband always says he would never eat junk food or sodas if I didn't buy them, I'd bring them home. And there's so much truth to that. They're going to eat what we buy. So it starts with us making healthier choices.

(music)

J. Tyree: As you can hear in the voices of Christy and all of today's guests, there is a lot of passion and purpose in our state when it comes to eating healthy and obesity prevention. When we eat healthy meals and snacks, we just feel better. And when paired with physical activity, eating healthy can help us avoid health risks that are often associated with obesity.



- D. Jasna: Developing healthy habits is important for our families and us, individually, and it will go a long way toward helping our state become a healthier place to live, work and play. I want to remind our audience about the great ideas and resources that are always found at [ShapeYourFutureOK.com](http://ShapeYourFutureOK.com). New items on the website include a guide to more than 100 free and cheap activities in Oklahoma, some great new workouts to shake up your routine, and two new ways to reduce sugar in our diet – a sugar intake calculator AND a low-sugar shopping guide. So again, those and many other handy resources can be found at [shapeyourfutureok.com](http://shapeyourfutureok.com).
- J. Tyree: We are now nearing the end of this episode, so we want to thank our guests Jae Morrison, Christy White, Heather, Trinnen and Calleigh from Jenks Middle School, and you, our listeners.
- D. Jasna: And as a reminder, you can listen to this or any past episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast at [tset.ok.gov/podcast](http://tset.ok.gov/podcast), or anywhere you normally listen to podcasts. So until next time, this is Dylan Jasna ...
- J. Tyree: And James Tyree, wishing you peace ...
- D. Jasna: And better health.

