

# BE REAL™

Forty percent of US children live in states where schools send BMI reports to parents (Madsen et al., 2021). Millions of US children have been weighed in schools over the years due to school BMI screening policies. Decades after these weigh-ins began, research has proved school BMI screenings to be a failed policy. The screenings have yielded no positive child health outcomes either on a population level or on an individual level. Instead, these screenings have proven harmful to students' mental health.

## THE BMI BACKSTORY

**DON'T  
WEIGH ME**

## IN SCHOOL CAMPAIGN

### Why take student BMIs in schools?

Over the past decades, the US government has adopted policies and initiatives in schools such as the "BMI Report Cards" and "Fitnessgram" that frame body weight as a source of potential health problems for students. Children have been weighed in school to determine their BMI category. The BMI screening metric has provided an easy-to-use—although historically controversial—method for schools to use to determine body-size norms for their student population.

In order to minimize harm to students when weighing them in school, the CDC spent time and energy creating comprehensive safeguards for school weigh-ins (CDC, 2019). **However, much less energy was spent on figuring out if the policies were a good idea to begin with. Do we need to measure our students' bodies in order to teach them healthy, self-care behaviors?**

Experts always knew school BMI screenings were a bad idea for students

Experts have always been critical of school BMI screenings out of concern for students' mental health (Portilla, 2011). In 2011, the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* warned of the potential harm of BMI screenings, giving examples of children who engaged in disordered eating behaviors and excessive exercise after getting results from their BMI screenings (Portilla, 2011).

**BMI screenings over the decades have NOT reduced body sizes in student populations. The screenings have NOT helped children's individual physical health in any way. In fact, these policies have caused harm to children's mental health**

A 2021 study of 28,000 students in California Public Schools over 3 years found that school BMI screenings "did not improve students' weight status or physical health." The screenings did, however, "decrease students' satisfaction with their weight," (Madsen et al., 2021). These screenings caused 'body dissatisfaction' which trigger a host of mental health problems (Madsen et al., 2021). **No studies have found benefits for students on a population level or individual level from school BMI screenings. After decades of measuring students' BMI in schools—involving millions of school children—the school BMI screening policies have proved a resounding failure.**

The CDC's safeguards for school BMI screenings were created to preserve student confidentiality and to protect student self-esteem. Unfortunately these safeguards have rarely been used in schools

The CDC recommends 10 safeguards to be followed for School BMI Screenings (CDC, 2019). However, a study from 2019 estimated that only 3% of schools used the most important safeguards. And 56% of schools used none or only one safeguard (Sliwa et al., 2019). **Most teachers doing the screenings had no idea that these safeguards even existed.** These practices have left children without protection for decades. Students consistently report being weighed, with weights announced in front of their peers (Sliwa et al., 2019). This practice has caused shame and embarrassment to students. And, schools have consistently ignored the specific parental and student opt-out protections in the CDC guidelines (Sliwa et al., 2019).



# BMI is a very flawed metric to use for determining a student's health status

BMI is an inaccurate tool for measuring individual health

Having a higher BMI does not mean someone is unhealthy

Telling students to change their BMI encourages dieting, which is harmful to both physical and mental health

We want students to know about healthy behaviors as they grow up and become responsible for their own care. Students don't need to know their weight or BMI, but do need to know what they can do to help keep themselves physically and mentally well throughout their lives.

- The Body Mass Index (BMI) test was created to be used to **study populations** of people, not as a measurement of an individual's health (Devlin, NPR, 2009).
- BMI was created by Adolphe Quetelet, 200 years ago in Belgium. His sample measurements were based on white, European male body sizes (Devlin, NPR, 2009). (Disturbing fact: Adolphe Quetelet also created the racist pseudoscience of phrenology.)
- Researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital have observed at least 59 different types of fat, each with different health implications (Kaplan, 2003). **BMI ignores all of these, instead, oversimplifying and categorizing people based on a simple, arbitrary equation.**

- Most epidemiological studies find that people who are categorized as "**overweight**" or "**moderately obese**" **live at least as long** as "normal weight" people, and often longer" (Bacon & Aphramor 2011).
- **Body size is not a significant factor in mortality rates** when controlled for socioeconomic and other risk factors (Lantz et al., 2011).
- In the U.S., **more premature deaths have been associated with a BMI of less than 25** than with a BMI above it (Campos et al., 2006).

- Dieting is the **most important** predictor of a developing eating disorder, with dieters at a **5X risk** of developing an ED (NEDA, 2018).
- 9% of the U.S. population—or almost **30 million Americans—will have an eating disorder** at some point in their lives (NEDA, 2018).
- **95% of people who lose weight regain it all within 5 years**, with one-third to two-thirds of people gaining more weight than they originally lost (Bacon & Aphramor 2011).
- **Body image can have a much bigger impact on health than body size** (Campos et al., 2006).
- "By learning to value their bodies as they are right now—even when their body differs from a desired weight or shape—people strengthen their ability to take care of themselves and sustain improvements in health behaviors," Paul Campos, author of *The Diet Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health* (Campos et al., 2006).

SCAN FOR RESOURCE CITATIONS

