

## The Living Skills Fifth Grade Semester: A vision for fighting child obesity

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
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As a co-founder and the current Creative Director of the Rancho La Puerta fitness resort and Golden Door spas, Deborah Szekely has long been known as a pioneer in health and wellness. My remarkable friend Szekely is now focusing on a new target audience: our nation's children. She is adding her extraordinary mind, energy, and voice to the chorus of those concerned about America's child obesity problem. Together with Dr. David Kessler, former FDA Commissioner and now Professor of Pediatrics and Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the School of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco, she is promoting a pilot program they hope will help educate schoolchildren on the importance of healthy lifestyles.

It's called the Living Skills Fifth Grade Semester. Szekely explains it is targeted to fifth graders because they believe children at that age still adore their teachers, parents, and friends and are old enough to understand lessons on healthy choices and to take on tasks like food preparation, gardening, shopping and budgeting. This makes them good candidates to be enthusiastic about learning how healthy food and exercise will make their bodies work best and makes them likely to be excited to share what they are learning at school with their families at home. As Szekely says, "We believe these children will become proselytizers to their family, much as past generations did when confronting their parents about smoking."

How would this semester-long intervention work? Deborah Szekely and Dr. Kessler envision the program this way: "What if fifth-grade American children receive an entire semester in which all classes in math, science, geography, language, history and the environment integrated existing fifth-grade educational requirements with studies of how the body functions; its nutritional and physical needs, and proper sources and preparation of healthy, fresh, nutritious foods?" They point out proven programs that are already being funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture through land-grant universities and colleges that could serve as models. These include a program at Rutgers University in New Jersey that offers children the chance to work on a farm; a University of Massachusetts program called Strength and Power in Nutrition (SPIN) that is tailored to low-income, culturally diverse adolescents; and a Louisiana State University Agriculture Center program that brings a traveling exhibit on the importance of healthy eating and exercise to schools across the state. The Living Skills Fifth Grade Semester would build on successful ideas like these and bring similar kinds of lessons right into the classroom.

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In the sample curriculum, assignments might include learning about the different tactics advertisers use to try to influence people's food choices; creating recipes for healthy holiday gifts; studying how different Native American cultures used the land; learning about the different parts of the digestive system; planning and planting a class garden; researching heart-healthy activities and foods while celebrating Valentine's Day; designing a nutritious "child friendly" restaurant menu; studying how the immune system works; calculating how much energy it would take to burn off the calories in favorite snack foods; and developing a sample family food budget. The program would have goals of teaching children how their bodies work, the causes of disease, and the importance of prevention—the "living skills" needed "for a long, healthy, and happy life."

At a time when more and more experts are sounding the alarm about the threat rising child obesity levels pose to our nation's future health and productivity, parents, schools, communities, and experts all have a role to play in finding solutions to this crisis. But the Living Skills Fifth Grade Semester is another crucial proposal to add to the list. As Deborah Szekely and Dr. Kessler say: "What if we don't let our children lead the way to their—and our—healthier lives? Then, as current trends continue, an appalling 86% of Americans could be overweight within two decades. Obesity-related medical bills will amount to almost \$1 trillion. The solution is prevention via education, and it must start now."

I hope our leaders and citizens will hear and heed them.

*Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).*