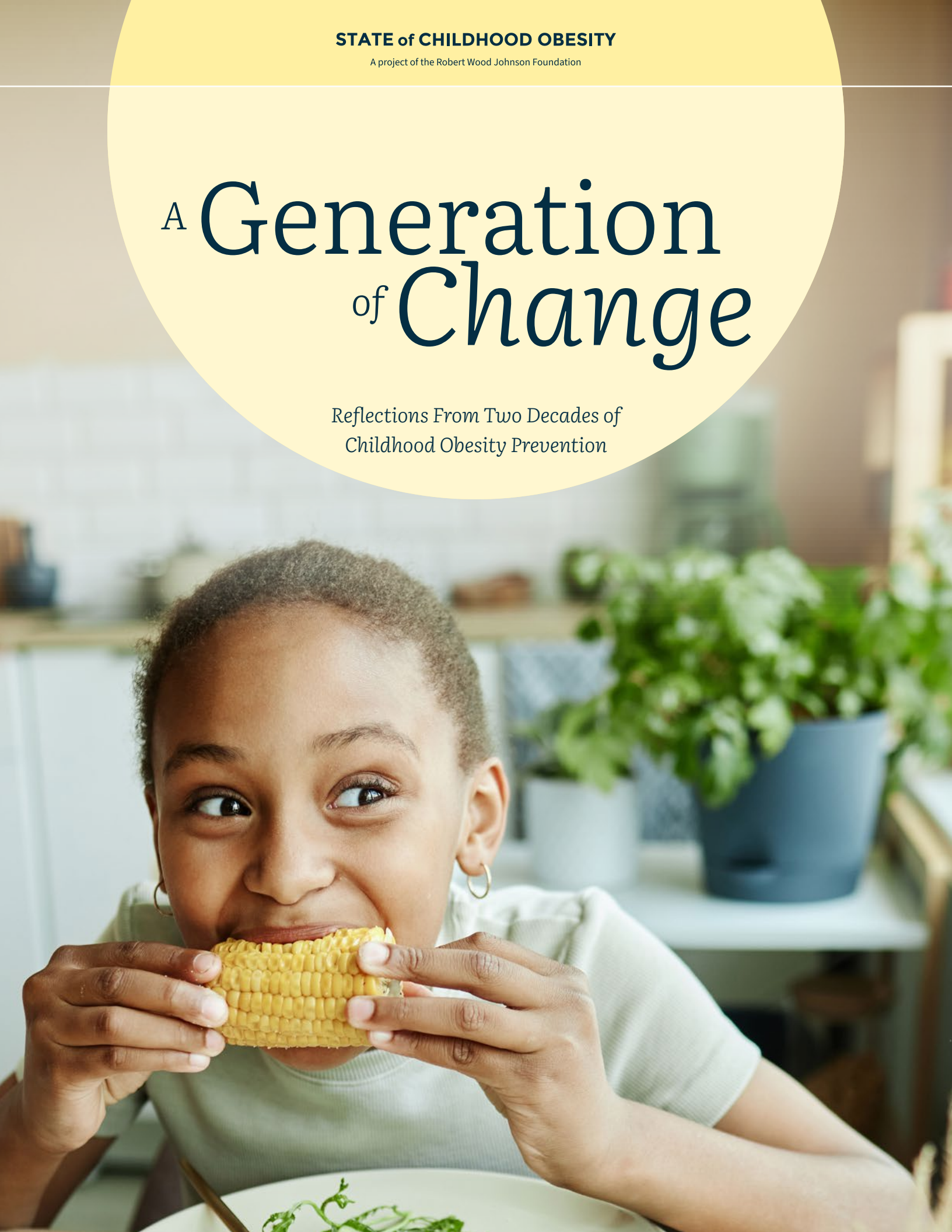
STATE of CHILDHOOD OBESITY

A project of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

A Generation of *Change*

Reflections From Two Decades of Childhood Obesity Prevention



Reflections From Two Decades of Childhood Obesity Prevention

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2025

Dear friends,

A Note of Gratitude

It's hard to believe that it has been 20 years since the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) made our initial commitment to addressing childhood obesity. As this historic investment comes to a close, we thank the many people and organizations who have dedicated themselves to this cause for two decades and beyond.

Our work together has always been grounded in a simple belief: that every child should be able to grow up healthy, no matter who they are, where they live, or how much money their family has.

And while there is still so much to do, we are proud of all that has been accomplished.

Together, our collective efforts sparked a national movement, built research collaborations, supported community leaders, strengthened nutrition programs, and shifted the public conversation to recognize that childhood obesity is a symptom of larger challenges families face in their communities, like poverty and structural racism.

These achievements reflect the power of true partnership.

Despite this hard-won progress, families, caregivers, and children are facing serious threats to their health and nutrition: disrupted benefits and severe cuts to SNAP; rising healthcare costs and cuts to Medicaid; the elimination of federal programs that help schools and food banks purchase fresh, local foods; and mounting uncertainty around the nutrition of the food served in our schools.

In the face of these threats, it's more important than ever to remember our shared values and our power to create change. All of us want the same basic things: to feel safe, be financially secure, be able to feed our families, and afford our homes. And while the government has an important role to play in solving problems, we must also remember we have the power to make a positive impact in our neighborhoods, cities, and towns.

I know this is true because we've seen it firsthand over the last 20 years: local leaders, communities, and passionate advocates coming together to create solutions that improve health and wellbeing for everyone.

This final State of Childhood Obesity report honors everyone who has worked so hard for so long to help all children grow up healthy. It highlights lessons to carry forward, inspiring insights from many long-time partners, and a timeline highlighting all that has been accomplished.

Thanks to all of you who have been a part of this journey over the past 20 years.

With gratitude,

Jamie Bussel
Senior Program Officer
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Lessons to Carry Forward

Together, countless leaders, advocates, and champions have driven extraordinary progress over the past 20 years to help all children grow up healthy. Although childhood obesity rates are still far too high, and disparities by race, ethnicity, and income level persist, this collective work has had a real impact far beyond this single challenge. RWJF has taken four broad lessons from these efforts that may be helpful in the years to come. These lessons we've learned and reflections shared by our long-time partners will continue to strengthen and inspire our work.

1 Major commitments require vision and staying power

In the early 2000s, leading health experts sounded the alarm about skyrocketing rates of obesity among America's children. Research showed the long-term health impacts of obesity, but there was no widespread agreement about what might work to prevent it or reduce rates overall.

Alongside our partners, RWJF saw an urgent need for change. In 2007, this urgency led to our initial $500 million pledge to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic—a deliberately large commitment. It was clear that all sectors of society—government, businesses, philanthropy, and nonprofits—would need to be engaged, even if the exact roadmap for each was still unfolding.

By investing in a way that demonstrated our long-term commitment, we aimed to show our partners we would work alongside them as they made their own commitments too. So many who began this work in the early 2000s are still working to make lasting change. Their perseverance has made a difference for families and communities nationwide.

"We must stay strong and stay focused. As we address issues that are driving poor health outcomes in our communities, we will encounter opposition for a variety of reasons, and we will also uncover challenges and opportunities that we cannot yet see. Our work is ultimately focused not just on childhood obesity but on improving the health and wellbeing of children and families. Having a dedicated consortium of organizations and funders concentrating on this work will be critical to overcoming opposition and challenges as they emerge."

Jessica Donze Black, RD, MPH
American Heart Association

"I appreciate the patient investment. Social change is messy and takes a long time. Not everyone is willing to stay in it for the long haul!"

Linda Jo Doctor
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

"Changing policies, systems, and environments is deliberate work. It needs to be consistently funded and evaluated to make continuous, swift, evidence-informed improvements."

Christina Economos, PhD
Tufts University

"When this work started, little was known about the most effective policies and environmental factors shaping children's eating habits and weight. We've filled this gap, shifting the conversation from individual responsibility to systemic, policy-driven solutions. That shift has been essential and opens up new pathways for us to explore as well."

Mary Story, PhD, RD
Healthy Eating Research

"My most inspiring memory is seeing how RWJF leveraged its experience, reputation, networks, and funding power to create a new field of research in the form of what is now the widely celebrated Healthy Eating Research (HER) program. HER was designed to complement the longstanding field of individually focused nutrition and weight counseling research by demonstrating how obesity-promoting environments must also be a critical focus of obesity prevention research."

Shiriki Kumanyika, PhD, MPH
UPenn Perelman School of Medicine

"To make lasting change, we need to start early. If we focus on environmental and policy changes, those small steps (a sidewalk, bike lane, or playground) can ripple into lasting, long-term systems change."

Marissa Davis
New Jersey YMCA State Alliance

2 Evolution is an important part of the journey

Decades ago, most efforts to prevent childhood obesity focused on changing individual behaviors: what people ate or drank or how active they were. But from the start, RWJF took a different approach. We focused on changing the policies and systems that shaped those choices, not the choices themselves.

However, in the early years, much of the field's work was still narrow, often targeting the policies and systems most directly tied to diet and physical activity. As the research expanded, leading experts made the case for evolving the work to address the broader, broken systems that harm kids' health. It became increasingly clear that preventing childhood obesity is about far more than calories, diet, and physical activity. It's also about how safe communities are, whether parents can earn a living wage, whether kids have access to high-quality childcare and healthcare, if a neighborhood provides healthy, affordable food; and so much more.

Together with our partners and peers, we listened, learned, and evolved. Over time, we came to better understand how so many policies place more value on some lives than others, often along the lines of race and class. That leads to fewer opportunities in jobs, education, and housing and ultimately harms health. But since people created the laws and systems that shape these opportunities, it is possible to change them.

"I am most proud and inspired by the work we did to understand and link childhood obesity with structural racism and then make that learning actionable."

Marice Ashe, JD, MPH
Public Health Law & Policy Consultant

"It is essential to continue focusing on the upstream factors that contribute to childhood obesity and to recognize the complexity involved in addressing and unraveling them."

Angela Odoms Young, PhD
Cornell University

"The large health disparities today, in obesity and many other chronic diseases, are related to structural racism, a key legacy of slavery. So, this work is important for public health to know and understand."

Sara Bleich, PhD
Harvard University

"Looking back, the thing I would tell myself at the beginning is that a good idea, an important methodology, takes time to implement and that it must evolve with the times, changing circumstances, and technology."

Karen Watson
Kinetic Leaders

"The non-medical drivers of health are the mechanisms that are driving our obesity epidemic: access to healthy food, reliable transportation, safe places to play. This motivated us to create tailored solutions, like tools to help healthcare systems build screening programs to identify non-medical drivers in patients. This institutionalizes processes to address the underlying needs of people of different backgrounds."

Amelie G. Ramirez, DrPH, MPH
Salud America!

"Before this broader effort to work on childhood obesity, the field was focused on working with individual children and families, one at a time. Randomized treatment studies were published in psychology and medical journals. It was all about education and behavior change. This shared effort changed the narrative to include the role of environment and policies, an idea that has taken root and is well understood today."

Marlene Schwartz, PhD
UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health

"The positive effects of policy change often go beyond those that are planned, leading to innovations beyond what was imagined during the advocacy process!"

Adam Becker, PhD, MPH
Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children

"It's essential to bridge the gap between scientific research and policymaking by identifying critical research gaps and effectively communicating findings to advocates and policymakers."

Megan E. Lott, RDN, MPH
Healthy Eating Research

3 Community leadership is essential

The best solutions for making a community healthy come from the people who call it home. So as foundations, nonprofits, government agencies, universities, and industry leaders collaborated to conduct research, change policy, and fund work, it became clear these efforts fell short in a critical way.

Alongside our peers, we needed to invest more time in building relationships and trust with communities. This meant funding community-led efforts and creating space for collaboration, but it meant more than that too. An old model of outsiders giving money to communities but not involving them in strategic thinking began to fall away. Many organizations, RWJF included, began listening more intently to community leaders who brought new voices and new ways of thinking.

In many ways, the broader field took a step back to let those with the clearest understanding of their community's challenges and the most promising ideas for building on its strengths lead the way. Working closely with local leaders has broadened the diversity of expertise, sparked new ideas, and strengthened the entire field's approach to this work.

"If public health is to dismantle the structural racism at the core of health inequities, we need to restructure our work, break traditional silos, facilitate multi-sector, multidisciplinary collaboration, and cultivate broad community leadership and engagement. The legacy of the work in childhood nutrition and other public health issues demonstrates that with intention and support, we can do this."

Lori Dorfman, DrPH, MPH
Berkeley Media Studies Group

"At every table you're part of, we must ask ourselves: Is there representation from communities most impacted by oppression? Are small, under-resourced organizations—trusted by the communities they serve—present? If not, expand the table."

Lori Fresina, MPP
Voices for Healthy Kids at American Heart Association

"Experiential expertise is important (i.e., people with varied expertise who work each day with children, adults, and families with the lived experience of obesity regardless of the setting—community, healthcare, schools). They have a better sense of this condition based on listening to those who live with it and their own expertise and experiences helping them manage the disease. Talking to these individuals helps map out the effect of real-life experiences and outcomes ahead of time. They see the future before the research confirms it."

Ihuoma Eneli, MD, MS, FAAP
University of Colorado Children's Hospital

"I'm inspired by the progress we have made on the path to healthy school meals for all. It started with the creation of the Community Eligibility Provision, which demonstrated that offering school breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge was a game changer for kids, families, and schools. We aren't quite there yet, and we still have more work to do, but we are getting there! More than half of the schools in the country offer meals at no charge to all of their students, and nine states have statewide policies."

Crystal FitzSimons, MSW
Food Research & Action Center

"The field benefited from the work to better understand how research needs to be community-based and not community-placed and to have respect for the community voice and consideration of the historical context of oppressive systems. Those systems underlie decades of resource constraints that have led to high levels of diet-related disease."

Heidi Blanck, MS, PhD
Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project

4 Self-reflection opens new pathways

Throughout this 20-year journey, RWJF worked with partners to assess what was working, what was not, and what needed to change. By closely examining any shortcomings, we aimed to refine the approach and make it stronger.

One area where the field reflected and changed course was the reliance on body mass index (BMI) as a measure of health. Over time, it became clear that focusing on BMI in reports and stories contributed to stigma and caused real harm. It may have led to people blaming individual children and families, or even worse, to children and families blaming themselves. The obesity prevention field ultimately realized it had to tell a different story. By focusing on the policies and systems that shape health and showcasing the positive work of community leaders, the field could foster hope and reinforce that a healthier future was possible.

In many ways, the collective efforts to address childhood obesity, coupled with honest reflections about that work, continue to shape RWJF's approach to other issues. Our commitment to dismantling structural racism and advancing health equity draws directly on so much of what we have learned through this ongoing work of reflection and evolution.

"Policy, systems, and environmental change is not a path for those chasing quick wins. It's a long, complex journey toward equitable and healthy living—one that continually reveals deeper layers of inequity and disparity. Real change demands persistence, humility, and a commitment to justice."

Darrin W. Anderson, Sr., PhD, MS
Urban League of Greater Philadelphia

"As the field evolved, we all learned the importance of integrating a broader approach into the work. That includes using justice approaches, across race, gender, land, and more; increasing the diversity of partners such as artists, environmentalists, mental health professionals, and housing advocates; and using language that is affirming and inclusive."

Risa Wilkerson
Healthy Places by Design

"I think the need to change industry practices from farming, to manufacturing, to distribution, to food programs and policies will require more focus and creative interventions."

Gail C. Christopher, DN, ND
National Collaborative for Health Equity

"We should have considered litigation approaches earlier on. We've seen that regulation and legislation can get undermined by industries that oppose the progress."

Kelly Brownell, PhD
Duke University

"We should have pushed more to invest in digital media and communications policy for public health and democracy. We know media impacts health, so we must change the media system to make progress."

Jeffrey Chester, MSW
Center for Digital Democracy

Building Hope for the Future

Even as there are efforts to undo decades of progress, hope persists. In putting together this final report, we turned to our long-time partners to hear what gives them hope for the future.

The next generation gives us hope.

"Young people give me hope. Students are still signing up to make public health their careers despite the vicious attacks of late. Thank heaven for young people's optimism and vitality."

Lori Dorfman, DrPH, MPH
Berkeley Media Studies Group

"What gives me hope is that the need for new paradigms, tools, and short- and long-term strategies is undeniable—staring us in the face and presenting us with a call to take actions that we never saw as options in the realm of obesity prevention. We have no choice but to welcome new ways of thinking going forward."

Shiriki Kumanyika, PhD, MPH
UPenn Perelman School of Medicine

"The next generation gives me hope. I love working with talented, ambitious, and kind young people (including my own children) who will surely change the world one day."

Sara Bleich, PhD
Harvard University

"I think back to the early days of Healthy Eating Research when they said that their goal was to build the field. They built the field, and I really love our field. In particular, there are now at least three generations of researchers who are committed to this work, and it's exciting to see presentations by graduate students of women who were my graduate students."

Marlene Schwartz, PhD
UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health

Shared commitment to equity and diversity gives us hope.

"Concepts like a caring economy, the solidarity economy, and the like are gaining traction and hold strong promise to support full health and wellbeing. Priorities like justice, dignity, liberation, respect, inclusion, compassion, kindness, and social connection are rising into the mainstream. I am hopeful that we can move all of this to the forefront!"

Risa Wilkerson
Healthy Places by Design

"Hope lives in the policies that center equity, in the partnerships that cross boundaries/state lines, and in the voices that were once silenced but now lead."

Darrin W. Anderson, Sr., PhD, MS
Urban League of Greater Philadelphia

Growing demand for changes to our food system gives us hope.

"In recent years, we've seen the conversation about ultra-processed food become mainstream. While we still have a long way to go, I believe that conversation is helping our policymakers look more closely at food marketing and address its harms."

Karen Watson
Kinetic Leaders

"A growing recognition that our food system is not serving public and planetary health, especially among young people who are clear-eyed about the world they want to live in."

Neena Prasad, MD, MPH
Bloomberg Philanthropies

"I'm hopeful about the changes we're seeing in demands for healthier foods and local transportation and urban planning policies that support active living. This work is slow and doesn't unfold in straight lines, but it's happening."

Marice Ashe, JD, MPH
Public Health Law & Policy Consultant

"I'm encouraged by the growing understanding today about the role of ultra-processed foods and excess sugar in our food system. I'm hopeful that demand will continue to increase for affordable, health-promoting foods through interventions like the food co-op movement in low- and moderate-income communities."

Gail C. Christopher, DN, ND
National Collaborative for Health Equity

Community leadership gives us hope.

"The resilience and leadership that I see in communities: organizers, advocates, practitioners, and operators."

Linda Jo Doctor
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

"Seeing local projects scale up, community partnerships deepen, and healthy infrastructure become the norm."

Marissa Davis
New Jersey YMCA State Alliance

Working across sector and policy gives us hope.

"I'm seeing people genuinely willing to work across the political divide to advance meaningful progress for children and families—even when it requires both sides to set aside their agendas and reimagine a new, shared path forward."

Lori Fresina, MPP
Voices for Healthy Kids at American Heart Association

"Every day in this country, hardworking people at community-based organizations, local and state health departments, WIC clinics, and federal agencies are focused on helping provide opportunities for better health and nutrition. Selfless individuals and civil servants, paired with dedicated academic researchers and field-level evaluators, will continue to support the field of public health, chronic disease prevention, and wellness in this decade."

Heidi Blanck, MS, PhD
Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project

"During COVID-19, HER quickly convened researchers, advocates, and practitioners, and together we generated timely evidence and policy solutions that reached U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Congress, and communities across the country. That spirit of collaboration not only made a difference during the pandemic but also continues today, as we evolve to tackle broader challenges impacting food and nutrition security today. Knowing that we can come together in times of crisis—and build momentum that lasts—gives me great confidence for the future."

Megan E. Lott, RDN, MPH
Healthy Eating Research

A Path of Progress

2001

U.S. Surgeon General issues a Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity, declaring obesity an epidemic and recommending changes from the individual to the policy level to support healthy eating and physical activity.

RWJF launches a suite of Active Living programs aimed at making physical activity easier and more accessible for all nationwide by improving the built environment.

2004

RWJF, Time Magazine, and ABC News host a Summit on Obesity, bringing together leaders from research, healthcare, policy, industry, news media, and the public to address the obesity epidemic and propose solutions.

2006

RWJF and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation launch the Healthy Schools Program to help tens of thousands of schools promote healthy eating and physical activity for over 30 million U.S. children.

RWJF launches Healthy Eating Research and funds the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health to advance science and research on childhood obesity. The research generated by these programs will inform important policy discussions on federal nutrition programs, dietary guidelines, and food and beverage marketing.

2007

RWJF commits $500 million to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic.

2008

RWJF funds launch of Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities, a national program to support policy and environmental changes in local communities to make it easier for families with low incomes to eat healthy and be active. The program led to more than 2,000 policy wins across 50 locations.

RWJF collaborates with PolicyLink and the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement in launching the RWJF Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity to help coordinate the childhood obesity movement and advance a coordinated policy agenda at the local, state, and federal levels.

2009

The WIC food package is updated to better align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, changes later cited as possibly contributing to declining obesity rates among children participating in WIC.

RWJF launches the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids, which worked with community partners to achieve 300+ policy and environmental wins to promote healthy eating and physical activity for children through 2017.

RWJF launches Communities Creating Healthy Environments, which worked with 21 community-based organizations and tribal nations to address the root causes of childhood obesity. The initiative secured 72 policy and environmental wins to improve children's access to healthy food, safe recreation, healthcare, clean environments, affordable housing, and safe neighborhoods through 2017.

2010

First Lady Michelle Obama creates Let's Move!, a national initiative dedicated to solving the problem of obesity within a generation.

RWJF and the Pew Charitable Trusts launch the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project to analyze and make evidence-based recommendations on policies that affect the safety and health of school foods.

RWJF coordinates with other philanthropies to launch the Partnership for a Healthier America, which aims to motivate private businesses to make their own commitments to address childhood obesity and to measure the impact of those commitments.

Congress passes the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, the first update to nutrition standards for school meals and snacks in more than 15 years, affecting 50 million children daily at 99,000 schools.

2011

RWJF launches Leadership for Healthy Communities to support local and state government leaders in their efforts to pass public policies that promote active living, healthy eating, and access to healthy foods.

2012

Updated nutrition standards for school meals go into effect, providing millions of students across the U.S. with more whole fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and less sodium and fewer unhealthy fats.

The Institute of Medicine publishes Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention, which serves as a focal point for the obesity prevention field in centering efforts on systems change in activity, nutrition, marketing, and support across schools, healthcare, and business.

2013

RWJF and the American Heart Association launch Voices for Healthy Kids, funding state and local campaigns that go on to achieve 142 policy wins reaching more than 167 million people in under five years.

2014

USDA updates WIC and school snack nutrition standards, increasing the WIC fruit and vegetable benefit and adding healthier, lower-fat, lower-sugar, lower-sodium options to schools.

The Farm Bill authorizes the National Healthy Food Financing Initiative, a public-private partnership to help healthy food retailers and supply chain enterprises to overcome the higher costs and initial barriers to entry in underserved areas.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine launches the Roundtable on Obesity Solutions to track the progress of science and make evidence-based recommendations on systems change.

2015

RWJF commits an additional $500 million to address childhood obesity over the next decade, with a focus on reducing disparities. At the announcement, First Lady Michelle Obama said, “While I might get a lot of credit for what we’ve done through Let’s Move!, I know that Let’s Move! couldn’t even exist if it weren’t for RWJF’s leadership.”

2018

Menu labeling requirements in chain restaurants take effect nationwide, providing consumers with access to calorie and nutrition information to help inform healthier choices.

2019

A comprehensive analysis published by USDA shows that school meals are healthier and nearly all schools are meeting the updated nutrition standards.

The Farm Bill creates GusNIP, a program to help SNAP participants buy more fresh fruits and vegetables by providing financial incentives.

The CDC announces declines in obesity rates among young children enrolled in WIC from 2010 to 2016. Another study estimates that updates to WIC contributed to a 2% reduction in the child poverty rate by 2019 compared to what the rate would have been without WIC.

STATE of CHILDHOOD OBESITY

RWJF launches the State of Childhood Obesity site and releases its first annual report, which includes the best available data on national and state childhood obesity rates, recommended policies to help address the epidemic, and stories of communities and individuals taking action across the nation.

2020

School meals are provided to every student free of charge to help feed children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing healthy school meals for all is found to improve schools' budgets and students' participation in the program, food security, health, and academic performance.

RWJF-funded study links healthier school meals with a lower risk of obesity. The study found that after the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, the risk of obesity would have been 47% higher in 2018 if the legislation had not passed.

2021

Updates to SNAP, including revisions to the Thrifty Food Plan, go into effect, leading to an increase in benefits for participants and reducing poverty.

USDA and HHS release new Dietary Guidelines for Americans (informed by Healthy Eating Research), which provide guidance on a healthy diet for all stages of life—from birth to adulthood.

2022

The White House hosts the first Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health in 50 years and releases a national strategy to end hunger and diet-related diseases in the U.S. by 2030.

2023

USDA ends extra pandemic-related SNAP benefits, contributing to a sharp rise in food insecurity at a time when inflation and food prices are high.

USDA proposes permanent updates to school meal nutrition standards, making them healthier and more aligned with the dietary guidelines for the first time since 2010's Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act.

Eight states enact universal school meals, and USDA launches SUN Bucks—a program providing free meals to students over the summer—to participating states. These major policies provided free, healthy food to millions of kids across the country.

The American Medical Association policy recognizes limitations and racist bias of BMI as a measurement and suggests using it alongside other measures of risk, never alone.

The Roundtable on Obesity Solutions publishes work exploring the limitations of BMI as a useful measure.

USDA expands the Community Eligibility Provision by lowering schools' eligibility to provide free school meals to all students, allowing 3,000 more school districts to provide free meals to students.

2024

Further updates to the WIC food package go into effect, providing participants with more choice and access to fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and culturally relevant food options.

2025

USDA ends the Local Food for Schools and Local Food Purchase Assistance programs, which supplied schools and food banks with fresh produce from local farms.

RWJF funds $20 million in new grants to nine organizations working to address structural racism in food and health systems, fill gaps in research, and collaborate with communities most impacted by childhood obesity and food insecurity.

Congress passes a budget bill that is estimated to take SNAP benefits away from more than 22.3 million U.S. families by passing SNAP costs onto states, limiting updates to the Thrifty Food Plan, adding burdensome work requirements, and eliminating SNAP-Ed.

Thank you.

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