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**Shumacher, Donald & Queen, J. Allen. (2007). *Overcoming Obesity in Childhood and Adolescence: A Guide for School Leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.**

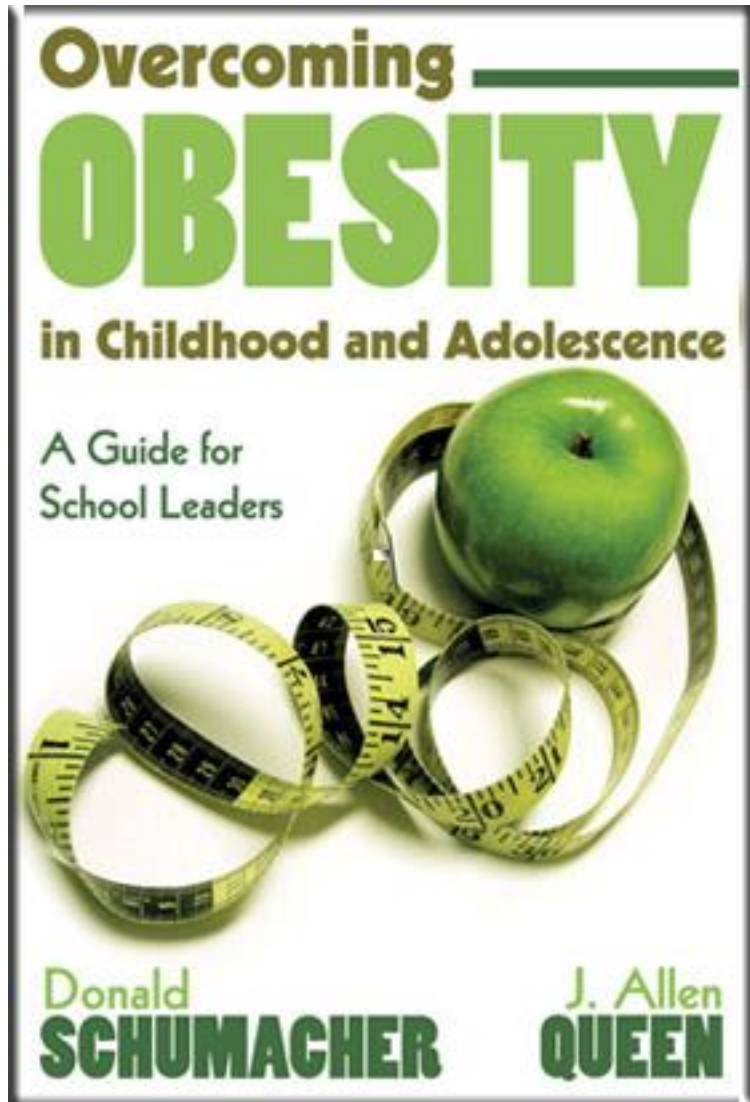
Pp. vii + 146    \$25    ISBN 9781412916660

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**January 14, 2008**

Donald Shumacher and J. Allen Queen's book, *Overcoming Obesity in Childhood and Adolescence: A Guide for School Leaders* is designed to assist school leaders, namely principals, in creating and implementing school health-related interventions for the purposes of reducing overweight and obesity among students, faculty and staff. In this review I will describe the book's main thesis by providing a very brief overview of each of the five the chapters. I will then describe come concerns I have with this book, specifically my fear that the book may be used as a means to justify the segregation of the fit from the unfit and the healthy from those who seemingly care little for their health. While perhaps unwittingly, the authors have contributed to a growing trend in school health discourse that is crisis-oriented, presents itself as ideologically neutral and natural and overlooks and/or downplays the human consequences of health-related policy decisions.

Substantively, the book is written with two fundamental purposes in mind. First, the authors seek to encourage and inspire school leaders to become role models by making health a personal priority. More specifically, the authors recommend that school leaders make their commitment to health visible by shedding excess pounds through increased physical activity and decreased consumption. The second purpose of the book is to provide school leaders with assistance in developing curricular and policy recommendations to encourage students, faculty, and staff to make weight management a priority and a reality. At the heart of their curricular and policy approach is the authors' 'tongue in cheek' (I think) recommendation to amend the 1918 *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*; principles created by a National Education Association committee to determine the objectives of high school curriculum. The committee's report named seven curricular objectives fundamental to secondary education: health, academic skills, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthwhile use of leisure time, and ethical character (Urban & Wagoner, 2000). Shumacher and Queen (2007, p. 107) would like to see an eighth principle added: the "intentional and active practice of preventing childhood obesity."



With five chapters in total, the book begins by describing the problem of overweight and its associated personal, social and economic consequences. In chapter one, "Childhood Obesity, Schools and Society" the authors reveal the multifarious problems associated with overweight, or what they describe as the "obesity epidemic." As evidence to support their claim that issues related to overweight have reached "global epidemic" proportion, the authors provide the reader with rather grim statistics on the subject. For example, the authors reveal that between 16 and 40 percent of children are considered overweight or seriously overweight. They use this data to make the claim that childhood obesity is the number one public health concern in modern society. The authors also present data to show that being overweight interferes with social, psychological and physical health as well as academic achievement and economic productivity. This chapter also outlines the factors that have contributed to childhood overweight; factors such as, limited physical activity in schools and the rise of low cost, highly accessible convenience foods.

Chapter two, "The Principal's Role as an Agent of Change" outlines Shumacher and Queen's belief that school leaders must display their commitment to the school-wide weight-loss initiative by first losing weight (if necessary) themselves. The premise of this chapter is that modeling is the

best instructional strategy. The theme of modeling appropriate behavior carries throughout the book. It is believed that children will not be inspired unless they can see that school personnel have embraced such dictums themselves. This chapter reads much like a self-help guide, offering school leaders life lessons and tips such as, set personal goals, never go to the grocery store hungry, decrease snack consumption and pack your own lunch.

Chapter three, “The Barriers We Face” describes barriers that might arise for principals attempting to implement the suggested interventions. Barriers might be classified as personal, institutional and structural. Institutional barriers include parental resistance and student or staff retaliation to the changes. Structural barriers might include existing policies regarding available foods at the school or physical education requirements. Personal barriers include overeating in response to stress. Chapter four, “School Principal Action Plans” and chapter five, “Maximizing Principal, Teacher and Student Plans” offer principals specific recommendations for making health a priority via curricular and/or policy changes. Specifically, the authors suggest implementing an “integrated unit,” or a set of subjects taught around a particular theme- in this case health. The authors provide examples of what a health-related integrated unit might look like for the subject areas of art, geography, nutrition, math and science.

The ideal audience for the book is a principal or school leader, particularly someone who has the authority to enact the kinds of curricular initiatives and policy changes that the authors recommend. In terms of presentation style, the book is well written and objectives are presented clearly. The authors did a good job at making medical information accessible to someone who might lack expertise in that area. The book also features set-off boxes that help highlight important pieces of text.

In terms of the content, Shumacher and Queen’s book fits very nicely with kind of curricular and programmatic resources available to school personnel regarding the treatment and prevention of overweight and obesity. By relying on a crisis-oriented discourse the book presents the problem of childhood overweight as yet one more consequence of modernity. The contemporary ills of overindulgence, laziness and absentee mothers (in particular, mothers who have entered the workforce and are subsequently not home to cook nutritious meals for their family) are to blame for this public health crisis. With few exceptions Shumacher and Queen’s book follows this basic template. What makes this book unique however, is the authors’ emphasis on modeling health as a primary instructional strategy and fundamental component of a successful program.

I found the authors’ belief regarding the importance of and their focus on modeling particularly problematic. The book lacked an essential discussion regarding the consequences of creating a school environment where modeling or ‘looking the part’ is a core value and central to the school’s culture. The authors failed to take into account the ways in which a school climate such as this might foster a negative work environment for many teachers and/or school personnel, particularly those who find themselves labeled as overweight. As an educator of future teachers and school leaders, I am concerned what the book’s message (intentional or otherwise) sends to all those desiring to work in schools. Does the book, for example, discourage certain individuals to work in schools believing that they may be negatively influencing students’ health? Moreover, might this book be used by school leadership to advocate for hiring certain body types over others? I am concerned that the focus on personal weight and role modeling health might make some vulnerable to stigmatization based on their assumed health status. While the authors do offer a cautionary note on the subject of discrimination, these rather brief remarks are overshadowed by the bulk of the text.

For example, early in the book we are told that, “skinny people are not better people, they are luckier than those with a weight problem” (Shumacher and Queen, 2007, p.5). Certainly in this sentence there is an attempt to disconnect morality from weight issues. This is eclipsed however by the majority of text that works to (re)connect morality and weight via discourses of Puritanism,

health values and saving lives of children. At best Shumacher and Queen's book suggests that school leaders labeled as overweight should be actively working on improving their bodies. At its worst the book might be used to set new criteria for which types of bodies are allowed to become school leaders. And I am concerned that there is not much to distinguish the two. I am bothered then that the book's rather singular focus on modeling creates certain targets of blame, namely overweight school leaders. If, for example, appropriate health modeling is critical to the success of curbing childhood overweight and obesity, then are school leaders to blame if obesity rates do not decline, particularly if the school leader did not embrace the necessary changes to model appropriately? Further, I would have liked the authors discuss in much greater detail and complexity the role of marketing, branding and incessant media messages directed at students to consume. Lacking this discussion sends the message that corporations bear no culpability but that overweight school leaders do.

Throughout the book the authors make the argument that reducing overweight and obesity among students has a number of added benefits, beyond the more obvious health-related advantages. For example, they write:

What if we could show educational leaders how to significantly increase student achievement; save millions of dollars in student expenditures; improve the health and wellness of principals, teachers, and staff; and, most important, save the lives of millions of K-12 students... would you be interested? Of course you would, as would all dedicated leaders or teachers as well as parents and concerned citizens for the overall success of America's children and youth.  
(p.25)

While I do not necessarily agree with the above claims, the claim itself is not my primary concern. From a policy standpoint, I question why the authors are positioning academic achievement as a positive gain of school-sponsored health initiatives. In many ways the argument to expand school health services (aside from just obesity prevention efforts) in schools is a compelling one. It seems commonsensical to assume that sick, hungry or neglected (in this case, overweight) children have difficulty functioning in a classroom environment, socially, physically or psychologically. The fact that these authors are positioning obesity prevention programs in the context of educational achievement (defined primarily by the standardization movement) rhetoric is salient. By establishing an interior affiliation with school reform, the authors' health and physical education initiatives become subservient to the standardization movement, defaulting to an involuntary position of legitimizing and validating this initiative. In creating such collaboration the authors send policy makers the explicit message that supporting school health services is a prudent economic and national investment rather than an altruistic effort to remedy existing health issues. Further, future funding of health service programs is left to the mercy of policy makers who use standardized criteria such as achievement scores to determine the effectiveness of the program.

Shumacher and Queen often use words like "national obesity crisis" and "global epidemic" to describe the contemporary situation. On one hand, using such hyper-cataclysmic evaluative statements presents the authors' dismal diagnosis of reality as fact, or in the words of the authors' "essential truths." Importantly however, and a point not made by Shumacher and Queen, is that not all scientists believe that society is in the midst of an obesity epidemic. Researchers Jan Wright and Michael Gard (2005) for example, believe that the obesity epidemic has been largely manufactured. These authors urge individuals to examine the scientific sanctity that obesity discourses seem to enjoy and evaluate whether "obesity talk has more to do with preconceived moral and ideological beliefs about fatness than sober assessment of existing evidence" (Gard and Wright, 2005, p. 3). Instead of being understood as scientific fact, Gard and Wright (2005, p. 3) claim that the obesity epidemic should be "seen as a complex pot-pourri of science, morality, and ideological assumptions about people and their lives."

On the other hand, using such intense phrases also invokes a kind of ideological neutrality. *If*, for example, overweight and obesity is such a pressing national issue that threatens personal and social health and economic viability, *then* the responsible school leader should take part in any initiative to stop it. I believe there is danger in using such crisis-oriented phrases to invoke action and policy in schools. School health projects in particular have long been depicted and justified as being politically and morally neutral and often urgently necessary. Historical analysis reveals however that running alongside these seemingly altruistic endeavors were more insidious motivations. How the eugenics movement infiltrated itself within school health programs provides just one example. To be sure, claims of ideological neutrality escapes even the noblest of intentions.

In conclusion, I do believe that the authors make a compelling case when they argue that personal health and wellness are important and should be represented in the curriculum and in school policy. I also believe that this book could be used to help principals understand how the school *environment*, defined as, the kind of food offered in the cafeteria, the food sold in vending machines and/or corporate omnipresence in schools, might influence students' health. In this sense the book does further the dialogue of school health programming by discussing schools' obligations to students' health and school leaders' responsibilities in light of these. Perhaps it is not necessary to revise the 1918 *Cardinal Principles* or to (re)remind teachers and staff who happen to be labeled as overweight or obese that their bodies are contributing to the *obesity epidemic* and worse that they are exacerbating the global crisis by failing to be proper role models for students. Perhaps what we might do however, is to offer students, faculty and staff alternative visions for understanding health and wellness; eclectic visions that utilize critical thinking to explore health inequities, social responsibility, and/or analyze the role of commercialism. These issues could easily be incorporated into Shumacher and Queen's notion of an integrated curriculum. While integrated curriculums are not new per se, what could be new and exciting is to complicate contemporary notions of health and wellness by investigating intersections between science and morality and/or analyzing the media's role in manufacturing singular definitions of health.

## References

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## About the Reviewer

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Carolyn Vander Schee is Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL. Her research interests include the intersections of educational policy studies, sociology of education, and school health issues. Carolyn received her Ph.D. in Educational Policy Studies from Georgia State University.

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**Editors: Gene V Glass, Kate Corby, Gustavo Fischman**

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