

# Weight of the Nation Campaign Kicks Off at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School | CultureMob

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by Gemma Alexander | 05/03/12 |

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Here on CultureMob, we review our fair share of horror stories, but previewing *The Weight of the Nation* was more terrifying than any of them. The four-part documentary series that forms the core of a campaign to raise public awareness of America's growing obesity epidemic premieres May 14 on HBO. The campaign was developed by HBO and a number of organizations, including the Institute of Medicine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Institutes of Health. In addition to the documentary, there will be a three-part series for families, 12 bonus shorts, an interactive website, a companion book, and outreach to more than 40,000 community-based organizations.



A new salad bar for Thurgood Marshall Elementary School

That outreach began on May 1 with the donation of salad bars and water stations in 15 elementary school cafeterias around the country, including Seattle's Thurgood Marshall Elementary School. Seattle Public Schools' Director of Nutrition Services Wendy Weyer told students how the new salad bar makes it easier to choose fresh produce at lunch, noting that Seattle is already ahead of the curve on school nutrition. While it is common for school cafeterias to offer fresh fruit weekly (94% of school cafeterias fail to meet USDA nutrition standards), Seattle already offers fruit every day. By September, every elementary school in the district will have a salad bar. Dr. Jim Krieger from Public Health – Seattle & King County told a parable of the kingdom that turned corn into gold at the cost of children's health, and encouraged kids to make better food choices. The short film "The Rethinkers" told the story of children in New Orleans who forced their food service provider, Aramark, to supply their district with fresh and local foods.

*The Weight of the Nation* uses interviews with scientists and summaries of their data to establish that America is in the grip of an epidemic that affects two thirds of adults and one third of children in this country. Rarely mentioning the social stigma or body image issues that make up most of our discourse on weight, the focus is on the impacts of obesity on the economy and on individual and public health.

Despite the data density, the show is easy to watch. We are so accustomed to seeing supermodel figures on television that crowd shots of average Americans hold a strange fascination – "Are we really that big?" The Bogalusa Heart Study provides both a focus for the data and a personal perspective that makes it clear no one actually chooses to be fat. The issue is not just one of will power – it is as much a social justice issue as a personal one.

While individuals cannot stop an epidemic, they can opt out of it. *Weight of the Nation* explores the factors that lead to weight gain and loss. Individual success stories showing the extreme lengths people take to control their weight are almost as frightening as the alternative.

Episode three shows the predatory side of the food industry, the elimination of P.E. and recess from most schools, and the emerging trend of children developing adult-onset diabetes and other serious health problems.

After examining the economic, political, and cultural forces that are driving Americans towards obesity, the series ends with stories of people who are fighting to return the American lifestyle to a healthy one. Despite the final note of optimism, watching *The Weight of the Nation* won't just have you watching what you eat. If you have ever avoided the basement after a scary movie, you might be afraid to go into Walmart for a long time afterwards.

The series will be repeated throughout the month of May in English and Spanish on all HBO services, including streaming on HBO.com. The series debuts on HBO at the following times:

**Consequences** Monday, May 14 8:00 p.m. ET/PT

**Choices** Monday, May 14 9:10 p.m. ET/PT

**Children in Crisis** Tuesday, May 15 8:00 p.m. ET/PT

**Challenges** Tuesday, May 15 9:10 p.m. ET/PT



A student at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School helps Dr. Krieger to some fresh fruit.