

Remarks by Ambassador Michelle D. Gavin
“Healthy Youth, Making Schools Healthier” Workshop
Gaborone Sun Hotel
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As prepared for delivery

- It is a real pleasure to welcome you to this important event where we will discuss ways to make our children healthier and to give them the best possible environment in which to learn and develop.
- We’re here because success sometimes comes with surprising consequences. Botswana’s story of economic and political success is well known. It has experienced consistent growth, with many benefits accruing to the population, in particular greater disposable income. This is a very good thing – and the citizens of Botswana are rightfully proud that increasing numbers are able to enjoy the benefits that increases in income provide.
- However, these benefits sometimes generate new challenges – and many are related to people’s health.
- With more disposable income, for example, people have greater access to private transportation. This is undoubtedly a good thing. But that also means these same people are probably not as physically active as they used to be, presenting potential health issues.
- Also, with more disposable income, people often choose to indulge in things that may actually be bad for them – things like tobacco and alcohol.
- Again, a somewhat more surprising effect of more income, people tend not to eat as well, consuming more processed and pre-packaged foods.
- What is the result of these types of unhealthy behaviors? You don’t have to be an expert to recognize less physical activity, more alcohol and tobacco, and more processed and pre-packaged food cannot be good for you. These issues present real challenges in my own country, the United States of America, and they present challenges here as well.
- As the result of these behaviors, an increase in non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma, is a growing public health problem in Botswana.
- The World Health Organization estimates that mortality rates in Botswana due to non-communicable diseases rose from just 10% in 2002 to 31% in 2008. And according to data from the Ministry of Health, unhealthy behaviors among adults are increasingly common.
- More alarming, however, is that some of the risk factors that lead to non-communicable diseases are also being seen among young people.
- For example, about 14% of Botswana’s students are smokers, 21% are drinkers and 12% are overweight. And these trends are going the wrong direction.
- It is critical that we work to address these behaviors among Botswana youth because we know that establishing healthy behaviors among young people is easier than trying to change unhealthy behaviors among adults.
- The topic of today’s workshop is creating healthier school environments, and the key point that we should recognize is that this is a critical way to help young people make good choices for healthier lives and it will play an important part in securing a brighter and healthier future as they grow into adults and future leaders of this country.

- But the benefits of healthier students are not just found in the future – they are immediate. The health of the student population plays a significant role in their ability to learn and develop. Health-related factors such as hunger and chronic illnesses can lead to poor school performance. And health risk behaviors, such as violence and physical inactivity, are consistently linked to poor grades and test scores.
- If we are to provide the best possible learning environment for our children, we must consider their health and well-being. I encourage students, parents, teachers, and school leaders who are here today to seize this opportunity. Take advantage of the experts with us to brainstorm and come up with workable ways to make school environments healthier so that youth and communities can avoid the risk factors that lead to non-communicable diseases and poor school performance.
- Again, I assure you, we are also grappling with these issues in the United States as well – for instance, more than one-third of American children are overweight or obese.
- That’s why First Lady Michelle Obama is focused on encouraging children and families to make healthy lifestyle choices through her “Let’s Move” campaign, which was launched in 2009 with the goal of helping people make incremental healthy changes.
- I wanted to share some of the strategies employed by that campaign with you today.
- The campaign has 5 pillars to address obesity specifically:
 - creating a healthy start for children,
 - providing healthy food in schools,
 - empowering parents and caregivers with information about the benefits of healthy diet and exercise,
 - improving access to healthy and affordable foods, and
 - increasing physical activity.
- Studies have shown that overweight children run the risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and sleep apnea, alongside the general social discrimination that overweight children sometimes endure.
- We are also using public education campaigns to encourage parents, consumers, pediatricians and students to eat balanced diets with the simple message of making half the plate fruits and vegetables.
- In the same way, we are reaching out to families to encourage young children to engage in physical exercise--and it doesn’t have to be something difficult or that takes a lot of time to do. It can be as simple as going to the playground as a family activity or walking to school. Being active together, as a family, has the added benefit of providing more time and space for parent-child communication, which can help with an even wider array of issues.
- Our hope is that by creating opportunities for children to consume balanced diets and engage in physical activities at school, children will lead the way in adopting healthy lifestyles for future generations.
- And we are seeing results. Because of the campaign, people in the United States are more aware of the benefits of positive lifestyle changes that increase family quality time, class achievement and weight loss in children.

- The “Let’s Move” Campaign is just one example. There are many others that we hope to share during the day from the experience of the United States and from around the world.
- We have a representative here from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has a long history of providing guidance to schools in implementing school health programs. Elements of these programs include health education, physical education, health services, nutrition services, counseling, psychological and social services, staff health promotion, family and community involvement, and a healthy school environment.
- The World Health Organization – also represented here today – has a healthy schools initiative that seeks to mobilize and strengthen health promotion and education activities to improve the health of students, school personnel, families and other members of the community.
- And we have local experts from the University of Botswana who will share their assessments of the school environment in Botswana and ways in which it can be improved. We hope that this collective experience and expertise can provide a starting point for your discussion today on creating healthier school environments across Botswana.
- And while you will hear from many experts, we also want to hear from you – your ideas, your thoughts, and most importantly, your solutions to address these issues.
- During the day, you will be given time to discuss and debate these issues and come up with practical solutions that can be shared with the larger group.
- By focusing on the lifestyle choices that lead to healthier outcomes and that avoid the incidence of non-communicable diseases, we hope that communities across Botswana can become healthier over time.
- We believe the key is to make information about the importance of healthy choices available, to provide support to key members of the community including parents, schools, chefs, community leaders, and health care providers, and to ensure a healthy school environment that supports the well-being and progress of students.
- So, I challenge you all today – tackle this issue with the seriousness it deserves. Learn from each other and take advantage of the unique expertise of everyone in this room to lay the foundation for a realistic action and accountability plan that can lead to success.
- It is not an understatement to say that when threats exist against children’s long-term health and their ability to advance as students, Botswana’s bright future is indeed at risk.
- The United States is proud to support this event, and we are proud to stand alongside Botswana as it faces this health challenge – as we do with other health challenges confronting the country.
- Heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and other non-communicable diseases may never be completely eliminated – but it is most definitely within our power to minimize their impact on society and to prevent them from diverting the bright future that is Botswana’s.
- I wish you great success today as you begin to lay out the action plan that will achieve that goal.
- Thank you.