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Michelle Obama's Impact on African American Women and Girls

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Let's Move! With Michelle Obama

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In 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama launched the *Let's Move!* campaign to drastically reduce childhood obesity within one generation. Concurrently, President Barack Obama formed the first White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity. Obesity is an urgent health issue for many Americans but is particularly problematic for American Indian/Native Alaskan, Black, and Hispanic children. *Let's Move!* and the Task Force share five goals: encourage healthy pregnancies and early childhood, empower parents and caregivers to make healthy choices, provide healthy food in schools, improve access to healthy affordable foods in communities, and increase physical activity. This chapter analyzes *Let's Move!* literature, Michelle Obama's speeches and writing, media coverage of the initiative and Task Force reports to assess the initiative's success in meeting these goals.

Introduction

Even before President Obama was elected and took office as the forty-fourth president of the United States, there was a lot of buzz about Michelle Obama's "right to bare arms".ⁱ Mrs. Obama's penchant for wearing sleeveless dresses and blouses garnered quite a bit of media attention. The former First Lady's style has received a great deal of praise and has drawn comparison to another First Lady – Jacqueline Kennedy. As Americans paid more and more attention to Mrs. Obama's outfits, many began to wonder how she managed to keep herself in such great shape despite her busy schedule as a working mother. Along with this attention came discussion of her 5am workouts.ⁱⁱ Although Michelle Obama is very active and maintains a healthy diet she also acknowledges that it is important to treat yourself. For example, in a speech at the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Nutrition Event on June 23, 2010 she said, "But today we know that being healthy is about more than just being physically fit. It's also about eating healthy foods and really learning which foods to enjoy in moderation. That's one of the reasons I talk about burgers and fries, because a life without burgers and fries is really depressing."ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, Michelle Obama is not arguing that children and their families should eat healthy one hundred percent of the time. Mrs. Obama does not rule out eating junk food in moderation or as an occasional treat.

In her book *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*, Mrs. Obama writes that she first began thinking about the consequences of today's children's relatively inactive lifestyles and lack of nutritious meals when her pediatrician inquired about Malia and Sasha's eating habits.^{iv} She also mentions this in several speeches.^v Although Mrs. Obama does not go into detail about

what the pediatrician said, one would assume that Malia and/or Sasha were in danger of becoming overweight. One media report indicates that she changed her daughters' diets after the doctor's visit, "less burgers, low-fat milk, and fruits and water instead of sugary drinks".^{vi} By relaying this encounter, Mrs. Obama emphasized that she is concerned about the epidemic of childhood obesity not just as the First Lady, but also as a mother.^{vii}

The literature on childhood obesity, as reported by the Obama White House, highlights its devastating impact on Black and Latino communities. "Over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates in America have tripled, and today, nearly one in three children in America are overweight or obese. The numbers are even higher in African American and Hispanic communities, where nearly 40% of the children are overweight or obese".^{viii} In the United States, childhood obesity rates are highest among Black females and Latino boys. Obesity is also particularly problematic for American Indian/Alaskan Native children. In addition low-income women tend to have higher rates of obesity.^{ix} However, Mrs. Obama rarely mentions the racial-ethnic or socio-economic disparities in obesity rates in her remarks and speeches about *Let's Move!* Although the authors do not know the cause of this omission, we speculate that this may be a strategy used to demonstrate that the *Let's Move!* initiative is targeted toward all Americans – and young people in particular. However, we argue that some of the program goals and guests invited to *Let's Move!* events reflect a concern for racial-ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged populations. Throughout our paper, we will highlight instances where Michelle Obama appears to be reaching out to these groups without explicitly mentioning them in her official remarks.

Why Focus on Obesity?

Mrs. Obama argues that obesity has become a national security issue. Obesity is one of the most common disqualifiers for military service.^x Approximately, 41% of the Army's annual applicants are obese or overweight.^{xi} According to Lieutenant General Mark Hertling "[a]round 2006, we began to see a sharp decrease in physical capability among the young civilians applying to join the Army, and then we saw that these recruits were more likely to sustain bone and deep-muscle injuries during basic training".^{xii} This line of argument suggests that the federal government has a compelling interest in reducing obesity rates.

Michelle Obama also outlined the economic reasons for eliminating childhood obesity and ensuring that American children lead more healthy lifestyles. "And when healthy kids become healthy adults, they're less likely to suffer from conditions like diabetes, heart disease, cancer – conditions that cost our economy billions of dollars every year. All preventable."^{xiii} Lastly, researchers have indicated that obesity may impact students' academic performance. At a School Lunch Standards Announcement in Virginia on January 25, 2012, Mrs. Obama said, "Studies have shown that our kids' eating habits can actually affect their academic performance as well."^{xiv}

Let's Move! aims to "solve the epidemic of childhood obesity within a generation".^{xv} In order to accomplish this goal, Mrs. Obama works to ensure that the various stakeholders are involved in the movement. *Let's Move!* campaign literature states that, "Everyone has a role to play in reducing childhood obesity, including parents, elected officials from all levels of government, schools, health care professionals, faith-based and community-based organizations, and private sector companies".^{xvi} According to the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity Report to the President, "...the

pillars of the First Lady's *Let's Move!* campaign [include]: (1) empowering parents and caregivers; (2) providing healthy food in schools; (3) improving access to healthy, affordable foods; and (4) increasing physical activity".^{xvii} These statements indicate that Mrs. Obama believes that families, schools, health care providers, government and community organizations must work together to solve the problem of childhood obesity.

Before *Let's Move!*: The White House Kitchen Garden

In her book *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*, Mrs. Obama writes that she envisioned that the White House Kitchen Garden would be a "learning garden" and a good way to start a national and international conversation about getting children to improve their diets by eating more fruits and vegetables. She also reiterates this sentiment in several of her speeches, which we will discuss below.^{xviii} In fact, she contends that the White House Kitchen Garden led to the creation of *Let's Move!*

When Barack Obama ran for the democratic primary in 2008, Michelle Obama first toyed with the idea of planting a garden at the White House. After Mr. Obama won the presidency and the family moved into the White House, Mrs. Obama began putting her plan into action. "...not since Eleanor Roosevelt's victory garden during World War II had anyone grown food on the White House lawn."^{xix} Because the White House is a National Park, Mrs. Obama had to get permission to plant there. The White House Kitchen Garden is a partnership between White House chefs and National Park Service Gardeners.^{xx} White House chefs were intimately involved with the *Let's Move!* Initiative. During the Obama administration, Chef Sam Kass was a senior advisor.

The White House installed its first beehive in 2009.^{xxi} Under the Obama Administration, the White House donated honey and about one-third of the fruits and vegetables harvested from the garden to Miriam’s Kitchen. Miriam’s Kitchen is a nonprofit organization located near the White House that serves healthy breakfast and dinners to the homeless.^{xxii} In addition to the garden, Michelle Obama wanted to bring a farmer’s market close to the White House. “On September 17, 2009, the Vermont Avenue Farmer’s Market officially opened for business”.^{xxiii} By donating food to Miriam’s Kitchen, Mrs. Obama demonstrated her concern for the homeless- those Americans who are in the most precarious economic positions. She was able to lead by example without having to link the *Let’s Move!* campaign to the poor explicitly. Additionally, Miriam’s Kitchen acknowledges that United States military veterans are disproportionately represented among the “chronic homeless” – their target population.^{xxiv} Helping military families was an important priority on Michelle Obama’s policy agenda.

Mrs. Obama wanted the White House Kitchen Garden to be clearly visible from the street. In *American Grown*, she writes, “That was important to me because I wanted this to be the people’s garden, just as the White House is the ‘people’s house’.”^{xxv} Mrs. Obama has attempted to make the garden as inclusive as possible. She writes,

“American Indians were our first gardeners, and we wanted them to have a special place in the White House Kitchen Garden. On June 3, 2011, American Indian and Alaskan Native Youth joined us to celebrate our nation’s rich heritage with a traditional planting of the Three Sisters – corn, beans, and squash...we planted White Eagle corn, Rattlesnake pole beans, and Seminole squash seeds, all donated by the National Museum of the American Indian”.^{xxvi}

In the accompanying pictures, all of the students wear blue *Let’s Move!* t-shirts. The authors assume that Mrs. Obama included American Indian and Alaskan Native children

to be inclusive of the nation's original inhabitants and to be reflective of their continued contributions to the United States. Also recall this group's over-representation among obese Americans discussed above. In addition to planting vegetables and fruits that remain popular in the United States, Mrs. Obama planted crops from all over the world.

“In our first year, we planed cilantro, tomatillos, and jalapeno peppers, which are frequently used in Mexican and other Latin American recipes. We added collards and okra, staples of so much cooking in the American South. We also planted cabbage, a European staple, and we started growing ginger and bok choy, a tender Chinese cabbage”.^{xxvii}

Our assumption is that the inclusion of a variety of foods popular among several ethnic groups (including both domestic racial-ethnic minorities and the international origins of European immigrants) suggests that through the White House Kitchen Garden (and later *Let's Move!*) Michelle Obama and her allies are attempting to reach children that are as diverse as the United States population. Perhaps, by planting these vegetables and herbs, Mrs. Obama hopes to ensure that the White House Kitchen Garden is culturally diverse.

Interestingly, the new school lunch and breakfast standards which Michelle Obama advocated for (discussed in detail below) have actually been criticized for being culturally insensitive. Townhall.com writes, “the government is trying to impose a new diet that children are not accustomed to. It's not reasonable to expect them to either eat what the government deems healthy or go hungry”.^{xxviii} The *Washington Post* goes so far as to describe this as a “clash of cultures” because the new guidelines impose foods that do not mesh well with cultural preferences.^{xxix} For example, Lyman Graham, a food service director in New Mexico states, “we can't force students to eat something they don't want... Many families in the Southwest will not accept whole-grain tortillas. Schools can't change cultural preferences”.^{xxx} Other examples cited in the *Washington*

Post article include the replacement of white biscuits with whole-grain in Tennessee and the loss of fried chicken in Georgia.

Nevertheless Mrs. Obama's invitations to Kitchen Garden events indicate a concern with being as inclusive of diverse racial-ethnic groups as possible. On March 20, 2009, twenty- three fifth grade students from Bancroft Elementary School in Washington, D.C. helped the First Lady break ground on the South Lawn of the White House.^{xxxix} "Bancroft is a bilingual school with instruction in Spanish and English, and it is home to students and teachers from more than forty different countries".^{xxxix} Bancroft Elementary has its own garden.^{xxxix} The school returned for the first planting of the kitchen garden, which took place on April 9th 2009.^{xxxix} In October 2009, volunteers harvested 55 different types of fruits and vegetables yielding 1,000 pounds of food.^{xxxix} Bancroft students have participated in several additional garden and *Let's Move!* events on the White House lawn.^{xxxix} Tubman Elementary School has also attended several garden events.^{xxxix} According to Bancroft Elementary School's public profile on the District of Columbia Public Schools' website, 73% of enrolled students identified as Hispanic or Latino in the 2013-2014 academic year. Additionally, 12% of students identified as White, 8% as Black, and 7% as Asian.^{xxxix} According to Tubman Elementary School's public profile, 48% of enrolled students identified as Hispanic or Latino and 47% identified as Black in the 2013-2014 academic year. Three percent of students were Asian, 1% were white, and 1% identified as multiple races.^{xxxix} Seventy-one percent of students at Bancroft and 99% of students at Tubman received free and reduced price lunch in the 2013-2014 academic year.^{xl} The authors interpret Mrs. Obama's repeated invitations to Bancroft and Tubman students as evidence of her commitment to ensuring

that racial-ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged youth learn more about planting, harvesting, and preparing healthy foods. Additionally, bringing Bancroft and Tubman students to the White House, directly exposes them to *Let's Move!* program initiatives. In the next section, we explore *Let's Move!* goals in detail.

Let's Move!

Michelle Obama launched *Let's Move!* on February 9, 2010. In her speech to the National Parent Teacher Association Conference in Virginia on March 20, 2010, Mrs. Obama laid out the four parts of the *Let's Move!* campaign.^{xli} First, *Let's Move!* aims to provide the tools and information parents' need to make healthy choices for their children. In order to accomplish this, *Let's Move!* encourages physicians to measure children's Body Mass Index regularly and provide guidance on how to keep children healthy. The campaign also urges the Food and Drug Administration and the food industry to make food labels more user-friendly and easy to understand. Large beverage companies pledged to provide clear calorie information on front labels and vending machines. In February of 2014, the First Lady announced that there would be changes in the way "Nutrition Facts" are labeled on packaged foods.^{xlii} The new labels will more accurately gauge serving sizes and highlight the sugar content. However, this change has not come without resistance. The CEO of the Sugar Association, Andrew Briscoe, argues that drawing more attention to the sugar content is useless, unscientific, and will distract from more important information, such as caloric content.^{xliii}

Mrs. Obama also announced the launch of LetsMove.gov where parents can find recipes and exercise and introduced the Apps for Healthy Kids challenge which would be run by the United States Department of Agriculture. The contest encourages software designers to create games and applications that make it fun for kids to be healthy and provide nutritional information and tools for parents.^{xliv}

Second, *Let's Move!* strives to eliminate food deserts within seven years. According to Mrs. Obama, "...23.5 million Americans, including 6.5 million kids, live in what we call 'food deserts' – these are areas without a supermarket."^{xlv} To make matters worse, food deserts often have a plethora of fast food restaurants.^{xlvi} Low-income urban areas that are more than one mile from a supermarket or a large grocery store and rural areas that are more than ten miles away are considered food deserts.^{xlvii} Low-income areas are defined as "areas where more than 40 percent of the population have incomes at or below 200 percent of federal poverty thresholds".^{xlviii} Evidence suggests that food deserts are experienced differently in urban and rural areas. "Urban core areas with limited food access are characterized by higher levels of racial segregation and greater income inequality. In small-town and rural areas with limited food access, the lack of transportation infrastructure is the defining characteristic".^{xlix} On average, racial-ethnic minorities (with the exception of American Indian and Alaskan Natives) live closer to supermarkets than Whites. This is likely due to racial-ethnic differences in urban, suburban, and rural residence.¹ American Indians and Alaskan Native comprise 1.5% of the United States' rural population. However, approximately 10% of this group live farther than 20 miles from a supermarket.^{li}

In order to help remedy food access problems, Michelle Obama announced a Healthy Food Financing Initiative (which the Obama administration started in 2010) that would invest \$400 million per year to bring grocery stores to communities and help corner stores sell healthier food.^{lii} The emphasis on “corner stores” suggests a particular concern with urban areas. The initiative is “...a combination of loans, grants, tax credits, and community economic development programs designed to fund new grocery stores, establish farmers’ markets, and equip retailers like corner stores to sell fresh food”.^{liii} The initiative has received support from a wide variety of organizations.

“Companies ranging from small local grocers to major national chains agreed to build or expand 1,500 stores in underserved areas in our country. And the Fresh Works Fund – which is, again, a coalition of companies and nonprofits including the California Endowment, but so many others- they agreed to dedicate \$200 million to support these efforts.”^{liv}

Wal-Mart is one of the major national chains that Michelle Obama is referring to in her comments. Mrs. Obama’s partnership with Wal-Mart became the target of criticism, as many worry that “Wal-Mart is using the First Lady”.^{lv} The agreement with Wal-Mart entails building more stores in food deserts and an increase in organic food options and locally-grown products.^{lvi} Part of the concern is that Wal-Mart will not take the commitment seriously, and is only agreeing to make changes to food products in order to build more stores. Author Michael Pollan also voiced concern over Wal-Mart’s pledge to improve the processed foods they carry, stating that “fresh, unprocessed foods” would be the better choice. Aviva Shen, a writer at ThinkProgress.org describes the relationship between *Let’s Move!* and Wal-Mart as “a corporate partnership that has yielded a mixed bag”.^{lvii}

Third, in an effort to make American schools healthier, the First Lady lobbied for improvements to the Child Nutrition Act.^{lviii} In December 2010, Pres. Obama signed into law the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. According to Mrs. Obama,

“This act sets higher standards for food served in schools, and for the first time it sets standards for food sold in vending machines and a la carte lines as well. In addition, for the first time in thirty years, schools will get more of the resources and support they need to meet these standards”.^{lix}

Michelle Obama acknowledged that increasing the number of schools that serve healthy meals requires the assistance of several entities outside of schools. “To help us meet this goal, several major school food suppliers have, for the first time, come together and made a pledge to help us by decreasing sugar, fat, and salt and increasing whole grains and doubling the amount of fresh produce.”^{lx}

Mrs. Obama’s partnership with food suppliers has been the subject of criticism. Some question the feasibility of making the desired changes within large food corporations, such as Kraft and General Mills.^{lxi} Shen states, “Big Food has circumvented her efforts at every opportunity.” Unwilling to surrender, Mrs. Obama has addressed the fact that junk food is marketed to children of color and asked manufacturers of processed food (Kraft and General Mills) to “‘entirely rethink’ their products,” in order to sell items that contain less salt, sugar, and fat.^{lxii} This is one of the rare occasions where Michelle Obama explicitly acknowledges that racial-ethnic minorities might be more vulnerable to obesity related risk factors.

Perhaps the new regulations for meals offered at public schools have received the most vocal criticism. The Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs make changes to the content and quality of foods prepared and

served to over 31 million students across America.^{lxiii} This includes (a) significantly increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables offered at breakfast and lunch each week, (b) disallowing substitution between fruits and vegetables at lunch by giving each group its own requirement, (c) specifying a daily vegetable minimum of each vegetable subgroup (red/orange, dark green, legumes, etc), (d) a staggered, but total switch to whole grain products, (e) required substitution of fat-free or low-fat milk in place of regular or two-percent milk, and (f) setting boundaries for the amount of calories, saturated fat, and sodium allowed.^{lxiv}

The complaints regarding the new standards have taken hold among many school districts around the country. The Wall Street Journal has published articles discussing the rigidity of the new standards, saying they are “poorly devised” and “overly proscriptive,” as “often the school lunch calories minimums cannot be satisfied with any combination of the low-calorie Let’s Move-approved foods”.^{lxv} Another common complaint is that the healthier food options are too costly, which leads to school districts losing money when students stop buying the more-expensive food options.^{lxvi} Another major issue is that the children are not eating the food prepared according to the new guidelines.^{lxvii}

Students dissatisfied with their lunch options have taken to Twitter^{lxviii} to share their grievances, contacting the former First Lady directly using her Twitter handle @MichelleObama.^{lxix} The tweets usually include a photo of the lunch they purchased at school, accompanied by a sarcastic remark such as “I’d like to see Michelle Obama eat this for lunch,” “Uncooked pizza that was served as the ‘healthy lunch’ Thanks... @MichelleObama @BarackObama,” and “Thanks @MichelleObama, because of you I get to eat cat food at lunch today #healthy @FriskysFancyFeast.”^{lxx}

Despite this criticism, *Let's Move!* also works to increase the number of schools that meet the Healthier US School Challenge. Healthier US Schools

“...provide healthy meals, physical education, nutrition education, and ensure that kids receive the free and reduced-price meals that they're eligible for.”^{lxxi} In 2009, 625 schools were participating in the HealthierUS School Challenge. By 2012, approximately 3,000 schools were participating.^{lxxii} Since *Let's Move!* began, the number of schools reaching the gold standard in the Healthier US School Challenge has doubled.^{lxxiii}

The White House Task Force on Obesity mentions a possible association between obesity and hunger.^{lxxiv} Mrs. Obama also comments on this relationship, “For many kids whose families are struggling, school meals can be their main – or only – source of nutrition for the entire day. So when we serve higher-quality food in our schools, we're not just fighting childhood obesity; we're taking the important steps that are needed to fight child hunger as well.”^{lxxv} This again, reflects concern for poor and working class families. Ample research has documented that racial-ethnic minorities are over-presented among the poor and working poor.

Lastly, *Let's Move!* augments and improves the President's Physical Fitness Challenge by inviting professional athletes to encourage kids to be active.^{lxxvi} Mrs. Obama writes, “The President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition is a committee of high-profile volunteers whose mission is to educate, inspire, and empower all Americans to adopt a healthy lifestyle that includes regular physical activity and good nutrition”.^{lxxvii} These efforts are consistent with the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans which were issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The guidelines encourage children and teens to do at least 60 minutes of activity daily (including aerobic, muscle-strengthening, and bone-strengthening activities). Adults

should do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity per week. Additionally, adults should do muscle-strengthening activities at least twice a week.^{lxxviii} Research indicates that physically active Americans tend to live longer and are at a lower risk of suffering from depression, developing type 2 diabetes and heart disease and experiencing stroke.^{lxxix} Although the 2008 guidelines were the first comprehensive list issued by the federal government, the roots of the President's Council run deep. Dwight Eisenhower created the President's Council on Youth Fitness in 1956. President Obama created the new council via Executive Order.^{lxxx}

In 2010, less than one in six American schools required at least three days of physical education for the entire school year for all grades represented in the school.^{lxxxi} However, by 2011 Mrs. Obama noted, "We've seen more than one million young people earn the President's Active Lifestyle Award – the PALA awards – and that means they're exercising one hour a day, five days a week, for six consecutive weeks."^{lxxxii} *Let's Move!* endeavored to double the number of PALA award recipients in the 2010-2011 academic year.^{lxxxiii} This is indeed a worthwhile goal. Research evidence indicates that physical activity is associated with improved academic performance among youth.^{lxxxiv} Unfortunately, extant research has also documented race and gender disparities in physical activity. Female high school students of all racial-ethnic groups are substantially less likely than their male counterparts to get 5 hours of exercise each week. Both male and female black and Hispanic high school students are also less likely to exercise 5 hours per week than white high school students.^{lxxxv}

Researchers have found that neighborhood quality is associated with children's likelihood of being overweight or obese.^{lxxxvi} More specifically, children who live in

neighborhoods with litter and poor housing and who have no access to parks and recreation centers have 20% to 60% higher odds of being obese or overweight than children living in higher quality neighborhoods.^{lxxxvii} Racial-ethnic and class disparities also continue to be evident. Singh et al. (2010) find, “After neighborhood and individual socioeconomic and behavioral factors were adjusted for, black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic children had 72 percent, 74 percent, and 66 percent higher odds of obesity...than their non-Hispanic white counterparts, respectively” (p. 508).^{lxxxviii} Children living in families below the poverty line are also more like to be obese or overweight.^{lxxxix} Age and sex are also significant. “Indeed, girls ages 10-11 were the group most vulnerable to unfavorable built environment conditions” (p. 508).^{xc}

Michelle Obama recognizes that perceptions of safety play a role in kids’ outdoor activities. In a speech she commented, “And some folks are living in neighborhoods where they can’t go outside, it’s not safe to open up that door and let your kids run forever.”^{xc} Although Mrs. Obama does not explicitly mention race or class in this statement, research has documented that approximately 26% of black and 23% of Hispanic parents (as compared to 8% of white parents) report that their children live in unsafe neighborhoods.^{xcii} The *Let’s Move!* campaign works to increase the number of safe spaces in communities for children to play. A nonprofit organization called KaBOOM! is mapping every playground in the U.S. so parents can find them.^{xciii} According to the official website, KaBOOM! seeks to remedy the “play deficit” by organizing communities to build playgrounds in one day; providing access to grant funding and online training; and locating and evaluating the quality of playgrounds across America.^{xciv} KaBOOM!’s online tool “Map of Play” seeks to identify “play deserts”.^{xcv}

Although, an official definition of a play desert is not yet available, KaBOOM! describes play deserts as “areas that are child-rich, but playground-poor.”^{xcvi} This tool is especially important because children living in neighborhoods without parks or playgrounds have 26% higher adjusted odds of obesity than children who do have access to these spaces.^{xcvii} To date, Mrs. Obama has attended two playground builds. First Lady Laura Bush also attended a playground build in Kiln, Mississippi in 2005. KaBOOM! built its 2,000th playground in 2011.^{xcviii} President Obama and Mrs. Obama participated in a playground build and service projects along with KaBOOM! and several other community and non-profit organizations on the National Day of Service and Remembrance in 2014. The Obamas packed 300 Go Out and Play! Essentials [Back]Packs as part of one of the service projects.^{xcix} The decision to partner with an organization called KaBOOM! on September 11th was met with criticism by some media outlets.^c

Michelle Obama continues on her quest to convince children that exercise can be fun. On October 11, 2011, The Penacook Community Center (located in Penacook, New Hampshire) helped *Let's Move!* and Mrs. Obama break the Guinness Book of World Records for the most people doing jumping jacks in 24 hours.^{ci} The First Lady was happy to announce that “... Guinness World Record officials have certified that an incredible 300,625 people across America and around the world jumped that day”.^{cii} In her speech, Mrs. Obama indicated that she considered New Hampshire a model for the nation. She mentioned the creation of bike lanes, farmers’ markets, and gardens (like the one at Penacook Community Center) as steps in the right direction.

The *Let's Move!* campaign hosts fitness events on the South Lawn of the White House to show kids that being active is fun. The Los Angeles Galaxy soccer players visited the White House on May 15, 2012. The U.S. Soccer Federation pledged to help increase opportunities for children across the country to get involved in sports.^{ciii} Kelly Ripa (talk show host) and Dean Karnazes (ultramarathon runner) stopped by the White House on May 2, 2011 during Dean's "Run Across America". Dean had been running between 40 and 50 miles a day.^{civ} Students from Thomson Elementary School and Ross Elementary School ran the 1.5 miles to the White House with Dean.^{cv} The student populations at both elementary schools (which are located in Washington D.C.) are very racially and ethnically diverse. Strong John Thomson Elementary School is an International Baccalaureate PYP World School. Approximately 62% of students identified as Hispanic or Latino, 19% identified as Asian, and 15% identified as Black in the 2013-2014 academic year. Ninety-nine percent of students were eligible for free and reduced price lunch.^{cvi} Approximately 45% of Ross students identified as white, 22% identified as black, 14% as Hispanic or Latino, and 7% as Asian in the 2013-2014 academic year. Strikingly, 11% of students identified as multiple races. In contrast to Thomson, only 25% of students were eligible for free and reduced price lunch.^{cvii} Once again, inviting Thomson Elementary School and Ross Elementary School students to the White House seems to spotlight Mrs. Obama's commitment to ensuring that racial-ethnic minority students and students from low-income families are exposed to the message of *Let's Move!*. These events are also examples of how the *Let's Move!* campaign uses athletes and celebrities to get children excited about exercise and eating healthy.

Another *Let's Move!* partnership recently received negative attention from the

media. The friendship between Mrs. Obama and Beyoncé Knowles evolved into a partnership, in which Beyoncé became a spokesperson for *Let's Move!*.^{cviii} However, after the partnership solidified, Beyoncé signed a \$50 million contract with Pepsi, which includes a sponsorship for her album and her 2013 Super Bowl Halftime show, plastering her face on Pepsi products, and appearances in commercials.^{cix} Critics argue that this represents a conflict of interest and sends a hypocritical message to the audience of *Let's Move!*. This is particularly problematic because Beyoncé is a role model for millions of people, especially younger Americans. Therefore, her connection to Pepsi creates a strain on the partnership for *Let's Move!*. Keith Koffler, a writer at *White House Dossier*, states

If Mrs. Obama is serious about slimming kids down, she should rebuke Ms. Knowles and make clear to kids that it was a mistake to include her in the Let's Move program, and that this is the wrong kind of role model for children hoping not to spend their lives battling to stay away from sweets.^{cx}

In Koffler's opinion, Mrs. Obama should separate *Let's Move!* from Beyoncé, in order to teach children that making healthy choices should come first, and should not be dissuaded by monetary offers or gains. Interestingly, this type of criticism is usually directed toward Beyoncé for agreeing to partner with Pepsi while associated with *Let's Move!*, instead of toward Mrs. Obama for allowing a partner to obstruct the goal of the campaign.

Other collaborations have yielded much more positive results. Some television networks embraced the *Let's Move!* initiative, inviting Michelle Obama to film public

service announcements and make appearances. For example, Mrs. Obama partnered with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to appear on *Sesame Street* and film a public service announcement (PSA).^{cxix} In the PSA she is cooking a healthy meal with Big Bird. Nickelodeon hosts an annual Day of Play, during which the network shuts down for three hours in an effort to encourage children to find a physical activity instead of watching television.^{cxii} In 2011, Mrs. Obama was asked to symbolically “flip the switch” to turn off Nickelodeon and their website for the three hour block of off-air playtime fun.

Nickelodeon sponsored an activities event in Washington, D.C. where more than two-dozen of their characters and actors participated in various games and interacted with kids to encourage a fit and active lifestyle. *Let’s Move!* also made efforts to reach the Latino community through events such as an appearance by Mrs. Obama on Univision, where she danced with Barbara Bermudos to a Pitbull song.^{cxiii} While the collaborations with PBS and Nickelodeon undoubtedly reached a broad segment of American children and youth, the collaboration with Univision is especially meaningful. To the authors’ knowledge, Michelle Obama’s appearance on Univision is one of the rare occasions where she explicitly reached out to a racial-ethnic minority community to promote *Let’s Move!*.

In *American Grown*, Mrs. Obama highlighted another key area that was not explicitly discussed in the National PTA Speech: “creating a healthy start for children in their earliest years”.^{cxiv} In order to accomplish this goal, Mrs. Obama launched *Let’s Move! Child Care* in June 2011. The *Let’s Move! Child Care* Checklist includes: ensuring children enjoy 1-2 hours of physical activity a day; limiting screen time for all kids and eliminating it for kids under the age of 2; serving a fruit or vegetable at every

meal; serving only water, low fat milk or 100% juice; and supporting mothers who choose to breastfeed.^{cxv} The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also contends that child care centers are important sites to implement “well-designed interventions” to increase physical activity among children under 5.^{cxvi} Restricting television consumption among young children is crucial before allowing them to form poor habits. Researchers have documented that 10-17 year old children who watched television more than two hours per day had 46% higher odds of obesity than their peers who watched less than one hour per day.^{cxvii} The *Let’s Move! Child Care Checklist* is also consistent with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s recommended guidelines on ChooseMyPlate.gov.

Mrs. Obama highlights several other offshoots of *Let’s Move!* in her book. Approximately 3,400 chefs have committed to donate their time and talents in our nation’s schools as part of the *Chefs Move! to Schools* program.^{cxviii} *Let’s Move!* also helped add 6,000 salad bars to schools as part of the *Salad Bars 2 Schools* initiative. Michelle Obama writes, “We’ve launched *Let’s Move! Outside* to make it easier for kids and families to take advantage of America’s beautiful national parks”.^{cxix} Additionally, at a *Let’s Move!* Event in New Hampshire on March 9, 2012, Mrs. Obama discusses *Let’s Move! Cities and Towns*, which she created to give communities tools to develop action plans that work for them.^{cxx} For example, the “Toolkit for Elected Officials,” a guide to launching a local *Let’s Move!* campaign, provides information for ways to implement community events such as hosting an event at the local park/playground, school partnerships with chefs who can teach students about cooking healthy dishes, and ways to improve the quality of foods served in local restaurants.^{cxxi} During Mrs. Obama’s visit,

Penacook Community Center joined *Let's Move! Child Care* and the city of Concord, New Hampshire joined *Let's Move! Cities and Towns*.^{cxxii}

Let's Move! Critiques

While the media has certainly been an excellent source of communication and public interaction for both Mrs. Obama and the *Let's Move!* initiative, it has also been an origin of negativity and criticism, as well as a platform for attacking the First Lady, her campaign to fight childhood obesity, and the new standards set in place for meals served in public schools. Journalists, talk show personalities, and laypeople alike voiced their concerns over the last few years, much of which received further publicity and acknowledgement of dissent.

A popular criticism of the *Let's Move!* initiative is that it can be construed as fat-shaming and encourages weight discrimination.^{cxxiii} Author Paul Campos considers the campaign to be an “invidious form of bullying,” and argues “the way to stop the bullying of fat kids is to get rid of fat kids.”^{cxxiv} This type of critique believes that *Let's Move!* perpetuates the thin-body ideal and exaggerates the stigma already attached to obesity. It also points out that children and adults with existing body-image issues become “hyper-conscious about their body weight” and experience intense feelings of shame and embarrassment about their weight because *Let's Move!* reiterates the existing emphasis on appearance.^{cxxv} While this may not be the intention of Mrs. Obama or the *Let's Move!* initiative, it is a common perception and criticism of the campaign.

A related point of disagreement presents as a concern for individuals with body-image and eating disorders at the opposite end of the spectrum. Lindsey Alexander advocates, “Although ‘Let's Move’ is claimed to be moral and effective, it might also

have a negative impact on a child's self-image if the child is predisposed to anorexia or bulimia.^{cxxvi} For example, encouraging children and adults who struggle with obesity, anorexia, or bulimia to concentrate *more* on weight and size could lead to depression or losses in confidence and self-esteem.^{cxxvii}

Others mentioned that Mrs. Obama's motivational speeches to children focus too much on what they cannot do, rather than informing them on what they *can* do.^{cxxviii} A November 19, 2010 article in the *New York Post* states,

Urging kids to turn off the TV is placing the emphasis on the wrong syllable. The point isn't to tell them what they shouldn't be doing, but giving them a positive alternative that would be better, like asking them what sorts of things they do outside, or urging them to do activities that require getting up and moving around, as her [campaign] slogan urges.^{cxxix}

The idea suggests that Mrs. Obama's rhetoric should appear to expand, rather than limit, the options children have in terms of exercise and physical activity. Explaining to children a list of things they should not do is less positive than providing a list of recommendations that are both fun and active. This type of criticism would gain more traction if there was not evidence of the First Lady doing exactly what the critic suggests. Mrs. Obama has indeed publicly and repeatedly asked people to share their favorite exercise activities via Twitter with the hashtag #letsmove, even offering a reward if participation in the trend was successful.^{cxxx} Mrs. Obama followed through with the promised reward, which was a one-minute video of President Obama and Vice President Biden jogging around the White House, in support of *Let's Move!* principles.^{cxxxi}

A final example of public scrutiny of *Let's Move!* includes the claim that, although obesity rates in the United States are decreasing for the first time in 30 years, this improvement cannot be attributed to the *Let's Move!* initiative.^{cxxxii} This argument

holds that obesity was on the decline well before *Let's Move!* was established.

According to Alec Torres, a writer at *The National Review*, any praise for Mrs. Obama's hard work should recognize only that "[she] has undoubtedly raised awareness about childhood healthy eating and exercise through her fame and personal example" because "outside of these personal enterprises, almost every governmental initiative of the Let's Move campaign has been unhelpful or even harmful."^{cxxxiii} This idea stems from the claim that the data used to draw conclusions about the drop in childhood obesity only overlaps with *Let's Move!* by a small margin. The expressed goal of *Let's Move!* is to eradicate childhood obesity in a generation, therefore it is too early for such definitive evaluations.^{cxxxiv}

Many people oppose *Let's Move!* solely based on their perception and opinion of Mrs. Obama's physical appearance – going so far as to call her "fat." Rush Limbaugh and a congressman from Wisconsin (among others) have publicly commented on Michelle Obama's body shape, and one area in particular.^{cxxxv} In 2013, a teacher and football coach at an Alabama high school was recorded by a student as he called the First Lady "fat-butt Michelle Obama" and "a big, fat gorilla."^{cxxxvi} Former South Carolina State Senate candidate Rusty DePass also mentioned in a Facebook post that an escaped gorilla from a local zoo was probably "...one of Michelle's ancestors..."^{cxxxvii} Both of these comments obviously have racist undertones given that depicting Blacks as monkeys, apes, and gorillas is part of the United States' not so distant past. Wisconsin Representative Jim Sensenbrenner commented, "she lectures us on eating right while she has a large posterior herself."^{cxxxviii} These remarks are echoes of Rush

Limbaugh's opinion that "our First Lady does not project the image of women that you might see on the cover of Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue."^{cxv} Sadly, Rush Limbaugh created a nickname for Mrs. Obama, as he often refers to her as "Moochelle."^{cxli} This nickname has gained traction, so much so, that it is a hashtag on Twitter, a collection on Pinterest, and a popular internet meme.^{cxli} The commentary and focus on Mrs. Obama's buttocks is just another manifestation of the intersection of racism and sexism in the 21st century although this practice dates back to when Saartjie Baartman (known as the Venus Hottentot) was brought from South Africa to be placed on display in London allowing for visitors to gawk at her seemingly large buttocks.^{cxlii}

The preoccupation with Michelle Obama's figure leads many to consider her entire crusade against obesity to be hypocritical.^{cxliii} This type of claim encompasses not only Mrs. Obama, but her daughters and her husband. First, Rush Limbaugh garnered media attention when he commented on her dinner choice while on vacation in Colorado,^{cxliv} "she is demanding that everybody basically eat cardboard and tofu."^{cxlv} He claims she consumes high-calorie meals, using her dinner selection of short ribs along with vegetables and a salad as an example, while restricting everyone else to "cardboard and tofu." Limbaugh's criticism directly contradicts Mrs. Obama's public comments (discussed earlier) about eating "burgers and fries" in moderation.

Other sources of criticism include the claim that, as Mrs. Obama created new standards for meals served at public schools across the nation (which are unpopular among the students), her own daughters enjoy better meals prepared by chefs at their

private school.^{cxlvi} Also, TheUSPatriot.com asks, “but how does the First Lady expect to force eating habits on the youth, if she can’t even force them on her husband? Don’t know what we’re talking about? Go ahead, Google ‘Obama eating junk food.’”^{cxlvii} These criticisms portray the First Lady as incapable, hypocritical, and unqualified to lead a movement in the name of health and physical fitness.

A third complaint addresses the idea that Mrs. Obama is overstepping her boundaries by dictating what children can and cannot eat – a decision that many believe should be left up to parents.^{cxlviii} Jason Kane and Saskia Chanoine, writers for PBS.org, report that many people believe *Let’s Move!* is “just another excuse for the Obama administration to meddle in the everyday decisions of Americans.”^{cxlix} *Let’s Move!* supporters contend that the real issue is that too many Americans are unaware of what constitutes a healthy diet and healthy lifestyle. However, Mrs. Obama’s efforts to raise awareness about nutrition and the importance of physical exercise frequently receive push back.

And lastly, it has been noted that, as First Lady, Mrs. Obama selected “safe” topics to address. “Politico Magazine’s ...writer Michelle Cottle scoffs, ‘the Ivy-educated, blue-chip law firm-trained first lady’ has embraced ‘safely, soothingly domestic causes’....”^{cl}. The phrase “a feminist nightmare” has also been used to describe Michelle Obama’s causes because “traditionally, domestic and child-related fields like ... cooking [and] childcare... are considered women’s work.”^{cli}

Conclusion

Mrs. Obama often reiterates that “...there is no one-size-fits all approach to solving this [childhood obesity] problem.”^{clii} The *Let’s Move!* campaign’s multi-faceted

approach involves changing the way healthy and unhealthy products are marketed to children; confronting large corporations about lowering the cost of nutritious foods and strategically placing stores in areas to eliminate food deserts; encouraging children, families, schools and communities to exercise and stay fit; educating parents and children about healthy recipes and nutritional balance in cooking; and enlisting the support of celebrities, professional athletes, Olympians, actors, musicians, TV show hosts, and many organizations to promote an improvement in the health of America's youth.

In addition to using a variety of methods to improve children's nutrition and overall health, *Let's Move!* uses a variety of strategies to publicize the campaign's efforts and raise awareness. These include traditional public relations efforts such as books, magazine articles, and talk show appearances as well as use of new media such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, You Tube, MeetUps, and Google +. The *Let's Move!* campaign's use of social media seems especially relevant given that the initiative targets young people.

Communication with the Obama White House was not primarily a one-way street as it had been with previous administrations. The general population ("regular people," if you will) has access to various online communities, including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, MeetUp, and YouTube. These online communities provide immediate, inexpensive, and heavily traveled sites for conversations between the people of America and the White House. As First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, took advantage of the convenience, popularity, and user-friendliness of technology and social media as a means of promoting and advertising the *Let's Move!* campaign. Her use of social media to advance her policy platform makes her truly distinct from First Ladies

that have come before her. Mrs. Obama's use of new technologies allows her to receive near immediate feedback- both positive and negative- from Americans.

Perhaps it is America's loving obsession with Michelle Obama that helped fuel the mainstream media's persistent coverage of the *Let's Move!* initiative, but she has productively channeled the attention in a direction that has enriched public awareness of childhood obesity. At a *Let's Move!* event in 2012, Mrs. Obama said, "I mean, one of the things that I have is a big spotlight. Cameras seem to show up...But we get to shine a light on wonderful things that are going on, on the ground, which is really where change is going to happen".^{cliii} In several speeches, Mrs. Obama mentions that her position of First Lady allows her to shine a spotlight on the good work already being done in neighborhoods and schools across the United States. She emphasizes that she hopes this media exposure will encourage other communities to emulate these positive examples as well as generate new ideas and programs that work best for each community.

Childhood obesity is undoubtedly, a very important problem facing the United States. It remains to be seen whether the *Let's Move!* campaign will reach its goal to end childhood obesity within a generation. It is too early to assess the long term impact of the initiative. Nonetheless, it is still worth the effort to encourage and teach America's youth how to lead more healthy lives. Michelle Obama has often stated that, "So with these efforts, please know that you're just not changing this generation – the circumstances for this generation of children – you're changing the circumstances for generations to come."^{cliv} Although Mrs. Obama has not explicitly discussed obesity's devastating impact on racial-ethnic minority and low income communities, these groups certainly have the most to gain from the *Let's Move!* initiative's efforts.

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- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "President's Council on Physical Fitness and Nutrition Event in Washington D.C., June 23, 2010" in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition.
- ^{iv} Michelle Obama, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012).
- ^v "National PTA Conference in Virginia, March 10, 2010" in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition.
- ^{vi} Daily Mail Reporter, "Reform Begins at Home: Michelle Obama Puts Daughters on a Diet as She Launches Anti-Obesity Campaign," <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1247254/Michelle-Obama-puts-daughters-diet-launching-obesity-campaign-U-S.html>, accessed September 16, 2014.
- ^{vii} "Run Across America at the White House in Washington D.C., May 2, 2011" in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition.
- ^{viii} *Let's Move!* Campaign Website, <http://www.letsmove.gov/learn-facts/epidemic-childhood-obesity>, accessed May 15, 2013.
- ^{ix} "Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity within a Generation: White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity Report to the President," (Washington D.C.: Executive Office of the President of the United States, May 2010).
- ^x "National PTA Conference in Virginia, March 10, 2010".
- ^{xi} Obama, *American Grown*.
- ^{xii} Obama, *American Grown*, 174.
- ^{xiii} "Let's Move Food Access Event in California, February 1, 2012" in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition.
- ^{xiv} "School Lunch Standards Announcement in Virginia, January 25, 2012" in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition.
- ^{xv} First Lady Michelle Obama's website, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/first-lady-michelle-obama>, accessed May 15, 2013.
- ^{xvi} *Let's Move!* Campaign Website.
- ^{xvii} White House Task Force, Obesity, 1.
- ^{xviii} Obama, *American Grown*
- ^{xviii} Obama, *American Grown*, 10; "Girls Inc. of Omaha Event in Nebraska, April 24, 2012" in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition; "White House Kitchen Garden Planting in Washington, D.C. March 26, 2012" in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition.
- ^{xix} Obama, *American Grown*, 29.
- ^{xx} Ibid.
- ^{xxi} Ibid.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} Ibid., 102.
- ^{xxiv} Miriam's Kitchen website, <http://www.miriamskitchen.org/cause>, accessed July 30, 2014.
- ^{xxv} Obama, *American Grown*, 31.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid., 48.
- ^{xxvii} Ibid., 51.
- ^{xxviii} Olson, Kyle, "Complaints Mount Against Michelle Obama's New Lunch Menu," Townhall, accessed July 22, 2014.
- ^{xxix} [Hamburger, Tom, "Michelle Obama's School Lunch Agenda Faces Backlash from Some School](#)

[Nutrition Officials,” Washington Post, accessed July 22, 2014.](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/michelle-obamas-school-lunch-agenda-faces-backlash-from-some-school-nutrition-officials/2014/05/29/6a8e4af6-e744-11e3-afc6-a1dd9407abcf_story.html)
http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/michelle-obamas-school-lunch-agenda-faces-backlash-from-some-school-nutrition-officials/2014/05/29/6a8e4af6-e744-11e3-afc6-a1dd9407abcf_story.html.

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xxxix Miriam’s Kitchen website, <http://www.miriamskitchen.org/cause>, accessed July 30, 2014.

xxxix Obama, *American Grown*, 31-32.

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xli Obama, *American Grown*.

xlii “Spring Garden Planting Event in Washington D.C. in March 31, 2010”.

xliii “White House Kitchen Garden Planting in Washington D.C., March 26, 2012” in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition; “Third Annual White House Fall Harvest in Washington D.C. October 5, 2011” in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition; “Spring Garden Planting Event in Washington D.C. in March 31, 2010” in *Michelle Obama: Speeches by the First Lady*, ed. Tyler Richmond, (Seedbox Press, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition.

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<http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov/Tubman+Elementary+School>, accessed July 30, 2014.

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lxviii Twitter is a social networking site, mainly used for microblogging. Twitter became an accepted means of mass communication faster than did Facebook, and has been a primary mode of information distribution for the First Lady and the *Let’s Move!* initiative.

lxviii With the use of tagging (@) and hashtags (#), Twitter users can directly contact other people and organizations, often aggregating users' tweets by subject using a specific hashtag. Michelle Obama has the username (also known as a Twitter handle) "@FLOTUS" and quite often communicates directly with her followers, answering their questions categorized with the hashtag "#AskFLOTUS."

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