

Michelle Obama, chefs aim to spice up school food



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(Reuters) - First lady Michelle Obama enlisted professional chefs on Friday as critical allies in helping fight the U.S. childhood obesity epidemic and making school food more nutritious and affordable.

"Each one of you has so much to offer when it comes to helping our children make healthy choices," she told more than 500 chefs, dressed in white uniforms and chef hats and seated on the South Lawn of the White House.

"You know more about food than almost anyone, other than the grandmas, and you've got the visibility and the enthusiasm to match that knowledge," said Obama, who is leading the administration's campaign to combat childhood obesity now affecting one in three American children.

The chefs taking part at the White House event included celebrity cooks like Rachael Ray, Tom Colicchio and Cat Cora, as well as local restaurateurs Jose Andres and Todd Gray.

The first lady urged Congress to approve increased funding to help schools afford to provide more nutritious meals. The Obama administration has sought \$10 billion in funding over the next 10 years to improve child nutrition programs.

Congress is considering a plan to spend \$4.5 billion over a decade that would increase money for school meals and include new standards for all school food -- whether it is served in a cafeteria or a vending machine.

"It's important that we keep the momentum going and we pass this bill this year," Obama said of the proposal.

In addition to cutting obesity rates, the administration hopes to cut back on medical costs that reached nearly \$150 billion last year for obesity-related diseases.

CHEFS ADOPTING SCHOOLS

Obama, who said her mother overcooked broccoli so much when she was a child that it was "hard to like," said if children knew that food could taste good and be healthy they might make better choices.

About 990 chefs are signed up for the "Chefs Move to Schools" program and Obama said she hoped to triple that number. The chefs adopt schools across the country to help students, their parents and school cooks learn how to make more nutritious, affordable meals.

Gray, a Washington restaurant owner, helped create a garden at a city school that was used to learn about nutrition and also for art, history and science lessons.

"We men and women in white can help facilitate this movement because kids see our whites and instinctively listen to us," said Gray. "They see us as a definite authority figure when it comes to food. This is why we are so valuable to this movement."

After the speeches, a small group of the top chefs gathered around the White House vegetable garden to harvest vegetables with local school children and make a simple, healthy meal.

(Editing by Peter Cooney)