

# Eating 101

## Boarding School for Obese Students Teaches Pupils New Way of Living



**FRESNO, Calif., Sept. 14, 2004** — Mal Mahedy didn't want to go back to her old school, where she spent her days dodging insults from her mostly thin classmates. The 16-year-old knew the pressure wouldn't help her gain the self-esteem she needed to lose weight, so she left.

Today Mahedy is attending an alternative school that only enrolls students with weight problems.

Mahedy says she believes her new classmates will help her in her fight to lose weight because they're all working for a common goal.

"A lot of people go through being teased and here everybody's dealing with the same thing. It's really nice to have somebody to talk to about it," Mahedy said Monday on ABC News' *Good Morning America*.

Located on a 68-acre campus near Fresno, the Academy of the Sierras has become the first school reserved for obese students.

The boarding school enrolls boys and girls ages 13-18 who are at least 30 pounds overweight and have been struggling with weight issues for at least two years.

While living in a traditional boarding school environment, students participate in a diet- and activity-management program designed to help them lose weight. They are also required to take part in educational programs meant to ensure long-term behavioral changes that will help them keep the weight off once they leave.

### Lifelong Battle

Academy student Terry Henry, 15, says he's been battling his weight problem with little success since early childhood.

"I think it was around junior high that I was twice the size of everyone and I had such a low self-esteem that I didn't even stand up for myself," Henry recalled. "My life was like on a downward spiral. I've tried the Slim Fast stuff, it didn't really work, and some 'eat whatever you want and speed up your metabolism' type thing ... I actually gained weight on that one."

Terry says he believes the school, which will cost his family as much as \$5,500 a month, might be the answer to his problem.



Mal Mahedy, 16, says she likes the idea of going to school with students who are struggling with the same issues she battles daily.

"I have fears all the time. There's a big chance for me to get diabetes ... there's just too many risks being overweight," he said.

Ryan Craig, director of the academy, says his students will work with behavioral psychologists, therapists and social workers to try to change the way they think about their diet and their physical activity.

In its first semester, the academy is treating just 12 children, but Craig says he hopes to enroll up to 70 each year. The academy's approach is strict. Food is weighed and there are mandatory exercise sessions every day. Each teen is also required to wear a pedometer, a tiny device that counts how many steps they've taken each day.

Terry says he doesn't mind the hard work and that he's looking forward to the day when he meets the goal he's been dreaming about for years.

"Mostly what I'm looking forward to is when I get that really small pair of jeans and they fit, and I just go open my closet and I take out this huge pair of jeans — I'm like, 'I can't believe I was actually that big.' " ■

*For more information on Academy of the Sierras, go to [www.academyofthesierras.com](http://www.academyofthesierras.com).*