

Sean Parnell

Governor

P.O. Box 110001

Juneau, AK 99811-0001

gov.state.ak.us

STATE OF ALASKA



JOINT RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Jan. 7, 2009

Contact: Greg Wilkinson, DHSS, (907) 269-7285, Cell (907) 382-7032
Ann Potempa, DHSS, (907) 269-7957, Cell (907) 240-9158
Terri Campbell, DEED, (907) 465-8719
Todd Brocious, DEED, (907) 465-2887

State health officials release results from two 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Surveys

Alaska's youth face risks from alcohol use, violence, sexual activity and other behaviors

(Anchorage, AK) — The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, published results from two Youth Risk Behavior Surveys today.

In spring 2009, the department surveyed 1,373 students from 43 high schools that were scientifically selected to represent all public high schools (excluding boarding schools, alternative schools, and correctional facilities) in Alaska, said Patricia Owen, state coordinator for the survey.

At the same time — and for the first time — 1,020 students from 15 alternative high schools (defined as serving high-risk students) were surveyed. The results of these anonymous surveys are posted online at <http://hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/school/yrbresults.htm>.

“We’re excited to see a continuing reduction in smoking among young people,” said Dr. Ward Hurlburt, Alaska’s Chief Medical Officer and director of Public Health, “but these surveys make it clear that we’ve got a lot of work to do. Not even one out of five Alaska high school students eats the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables, and fewer than half of our young people get enough daily exercise. These results not only provide a window to the physical and behavioral health of Alaska’s young people, but also serve as a predictor of future health issues for our state.”

The survey asked students to report certain risky behaviors. The following findings reflect responses from high school students attending traditional high schools:

Alcohol and drug use:

- 33.2 percent of high school students had consumed alcohol within the past 30 days;
 - Compared to 39.7 percent in 2007; 38.7 percent in 2003 and 47.5 percent in 1995.
- 22.7 percent of high school students reported using marijuana in the past 30 days;
 - Compared to 20.5 percent in 2007; 23.9 percent in 2003 and 28.7 percent in 1995;
- 24.8 percent of students were offered, sold or given an illegal drug by someone on school property during the past 12 months;
 - Compared to 25.1 percent in 2007; 28.4 percent in 2003 and 34.1 percent in 1995.

Violence and suicide:

- 27.8 percent of high school students had been in a physical fight during the past year;
 - Compared to 29.2 percent in 2007; 27.1 percent in 2003 and 35.8 percent in 1995;

-more-

- 13.3 percent had been physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year;
 - Compared to 12.4 percent in 2007; 10.8 percent in 2003 (1995 numbers were not available);
- 8.5 percent reported attempting suicide in the past 12 months;
 - Compared to 10.7 percent in 2007; 8.1 percent in 2003 and 9.4 percent in 1995
- 20.7 percent reported having been bullied on school property in the past 12 months.
 - This is the first year the survey asked this question.

Other behaviors that increase the risk of health problems:

- 43.5 percent of high school students have had sexual intercourse;
 - Compared to 45.1 percent in 2007; 39.6 percent in 2003 and 47.2 percent in 1995;
- 15.7 percent of high school students smoked tobacco in the past 30 days;
 - Compared to 17.8 percent in 2007; 19.2 percent in 2003 and 36.5 percent in 1995;
- 26.2 percent were overweight or obese;
 - Compared to 27.3 percent in 2007; 25.4 percent in 2003 (1995 numbers were not available).

The findings from alternative high schools show that for almost every measure, these students are at significantly higher risk than their peers at traditional schools:

Alcohol and drug use:

- 57 percent of alternative students vs. 33.2 percent of traditional students had consumed alcohol within the past 30 days;
- 50.5 percent of alternative students vs. 22.7 percent of traditional students reported using marijuana in the past 30 days;
- 32.4 percent of alternative students vs. 24.8 percent of traditional students were offered, sold or given an illegal drug by someone on school property during the past 12 months;
- 48.9 percent of alternative students vs. 20.9 percent of traditional students had used un-prescribed drugs one or more times during their life.

Violence and suicide:

- 45.7 percent of alternative students vs. 27.8 percent of traditional students had been in a physical fight during the past year;
- 21.3 percent of alternative students vs. 13.3 percent of traditional students had been physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year;
- 11.3 percent of alternative students vs. 8.5 percent of traditional students reported attempting suicide in the past 12 months.

Other behaviors that increase the risk of health problems:

- 82.2 percent of alternative students vs. 43.5 percent of traditional students have had sexual intercourse;
- 58 percent of alternative students vs. 15.7 percent of traditional students smoked in the past 30 days;
- 37.2 percent of alternative students vs. 26.2 percent of traditional students were overweight or obese.

Alternative high school students were also more likely than traditional high school students to have engaged in risk taking behavior before the age of 13.

While the standard YRBS captures excellent data on the majority of students, it intentionally has not included schools that serve high-risk students. Alaska decided it was essential to understand the condition and needs of these students at alternative schools. The state's federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools Grant and its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention require programs that target Alaska's highest-risk student populations.

Alternative schools were first surveyed nationally in 1998. The results revealed disproportionate levels of risk behaviors in this student population. No additional national surveys have been conducted.

In 2007, the Anchorage School District completed a survey of its alternative schools, and the results demonstrated significant differences in risk-taking behaviors when compared to traditional high school populations. Examination of these data led to the creation of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development's Alternative Schools Healthy Students Initiative. Information about the initiative is available at <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/alt/>.

The Alaska Education Plan for public schools, created in 2008 by several hundred Alaskans from all walks of life, also strongly emphasizes student health and safety. To achieve the goal of healthy students in safe schools, it is important to establish baseline data and to monitor progress through credible, gold-standard tools such as the YRBS.

“One of the main goals of the Alaska Education Plan is that students will have access to safe schools, where they develop healthy and safe practices for life,” said Alaska Department of Education Commissioner Larry LeDoux. “Students need to feel safe socially, physically and emotionally if they are to learn at school. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicates that we have a long way to go. Every one of the survey's statistics was reported by real students with real problems — problems that we must address if we are to reach our goal.”

The YRBS is part of a national surveillance system developed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to assess and address health risks among high school students. The survey is conducted in Alaska every other year through the cooperation of the state Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Education and Early Development and public high schools statewide.

###

DHSS is now on Twitter. Follow health updates at www.twitter.com/Alaska_DHSS.