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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Fact Sheet: 2009 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Surveys

What is the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)?

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is part of an epidemiological surveillance system that was established in 1990 by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It was developed to monitor health risk behaviors among youth that contribute markedly to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems of youth and adults in the United States. These behaviors are often established during childhood and early adolescence:

- Tobacco use;
- Unhealthy dietary behaviors;
- Inadequate physical activity;
- Alcohol and other drug use;
- Sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection; and
- Behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence.

What is the purpose of the YRBS?

- Determine the prevalence of health-risk behaviors;
- Assess whether health-risk behaviors increase, decrease, or stay the same over time;
- Provide comparable national, state and local data;
- Provide comparable data among subpopulations of youth; and
- Monitor progress toward achieving national and state health goals and other program indicators.

How long has Alaska participated in the YRBS?

The YRBS high school survey was first implemented at the national level in 1990. Since that time, the CDC has sponsored national surveys from 1991 to the present on an every-other-year basis. Alaska first participated in the YRBS in 1995 and obtained representative statewide data. Due to external factors, the YRBS was not administered in 1997. It was administered in 1999; however the Anchorage School District did not participate. Without Anchorage the data were not representative of the state as a whole. The survey was administered in 2001, but unfortunately low student response rates rendered the data unusable. Districts indicated that the new requirement for signed (active) parental permission in 2001 was the primary reason for the low response rate. In 2003 the survey was administered statewide with active parental consent and representative data were obtained,

making this the first statewide YRBS representative sample since 1995. The survey was again administered in 2005, however the response rate fell just below the target and the data was not used. In 2007 and in 2009, the survey was administered and achieved an adequate response rate, yielding important survey results.

What is the difference between active and passive consent?

Alaska's active parental consent law, AS 14.03.110, prohibits public schools from administering surveys or questionnaires that ask about personal or family affairs, or anything else that is not a matter of public record or readily observable in public, without first getting written permission from all participating students' parents or legal guardians (opt in). This law holds regardless of whether a survey is anonymous or not. Alaska is one of a few states in the nation that has a school survey law requiring active parental consent for surveys of this type. Most states employ passive parental consent when administering such anonymous surveys. Passive parental consent involves notifying and informing the parents about the survey and assuming that students will participate unless the parent provides a written refusal to opt out of the survey.

Two statewide surveys were conducted in 2009:

Traditional High Schools - The YRBS survey of regular (traditional) public high schools (excluding private schools, boarding schools, alternative schools and correctional facilities) was conducted as usual. A two-stage sample design was used to select the actual students for participation. The first stage consisted of selecting schools. Schools were selected with probability proportional to the size of their enrollment. Once a school was selected, classes were selected as the second stage. Eligible classes were those where a student would be enrolled in one and only one class at a time – second period or required English, for example. This gave each student an equal opportunity of being selected. A school district, individual school, student, or student's parent could decline participation at any time.

This YRBS survey was completed by 1,373 students from 43 traditional high schools that were scientifically selected to be included in the survey. The school response rate was 91 percent and the student response rate was 64 percent, resulting in an **overall response rate of 62 percent**. The CDC has determined that the overall response rate must be 60 percent or greater in order for the data to represent the high school population of the state. Therefore, these survey results represent 33,271 students from grades 9 through 12 in traditional public high schools.

Alternative High Schools - For the first time, a statewide YRBS survey of high school students in Alaska's alternative schools was conducted. Fifteen alternative schools were chosen to be included in the survey and 1,020 students completed the survey. The school response rate was 100 percent and the student response rate was 71 percent, resulting in an overall response rate of 71 percent.

Alternative schools serving at-risk students are excluded from traditional statewide YRBS surveys per CDC guidelines. Although one national Alternative School YRBS was conducted in 1998, revealing significantly elevated risk behavior among this population, no further national YRBS surveys of alternative schools have been conducted. Since Alaska's Department of Education and Early Development (EED) presently manages several federal grants that require it to direct services and resources to Alaska's most at-risk student/youth populations, it became essential to conduct a statewide alternative schools YRBS to determine if our state's alternative schools profiled consistently with the national alternative schools. Our data indicates Alaska alternative schools report similar levels of risk behavior to the National Alternative Schools Survey of 1998. The results

of this survey provides EED with the credible data it needs to best direct its at-risk initiatives, to determine the level of risk behaviors present in this student population, to advocate for needed supports, and to measure any progress made in decreasing student risk behaviors as a result of its interventions. It is anticipated these data will also be invaluable to Alaska's alternative schools on a local level as they seek to provide empirical evidence for any needed additional resources.

How was the survey administered?

The YRBS survey is voluntary and anonymous. For all classes, teachers or proctors were given a script to read to students that established guidelines for student privacy and anonymity and the importance of the survey. Each student was given an unmarked envelope in which to seal his or her survey before turning it in. These survey envelopes remained sealed until received at a central state collection site. The CDC and a CDC contractor analyzed the state survey data for both the traditional high schools and the alternative high schools.

A national YRBS is also conducted every other year. The 2009 national results will not be available until early summer 2010. As a result, 2007 National YRBS results are being used for comparison purposes.

How are the data used?

The results of the YRBS are used to detect changes in risk behaviors over time and provide an important piece of program planning and evaluation, curriculum development and decision-making regarding the use of available resources. The information from the YRBS can be used to help schools and communities identify strengths and weaknesses in current programs and services. Additionally, the results can be used by schools and communities when applying for grant funding to initiate or maintain programs that serve youth.

Who supported the YRBS in Alaska?

The YRBS in Alaska is a cooperative effort between the state departments of Health and Social Services and Education and Early Development. The survey is also endorsed by the following groups and boards:

- Association of Alaska School Boards
- Alaska Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
- Alaska Action for Healthy Kids
- All Alaska Pediatric Partnership
- American Heart Association, Pacific/Mountain Affiliate
- American Lung Association of Alaska
- American Cancer Society, Alaska
- Alaska Health Education Consortium
- Alaska Tobacco Control Alliance
- Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

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