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Percentage of overweight, obese students decreases in Anchorage

After holding steady for several years, percentage takes small, but significant, dip

ANCHORAGE — The percentage of overweight and obese students in the Anchorage School District decreased during the past eight school years, marking the first time in more than a decade of monitoring that Anchorage students' weights may be improving.

Although small, the decrease in prevalence of overweight and obese students from 38 percent to 36 percent between the 2002-03 and 2010-11 school years is considered statistically significant. That means the decline is unlikely to be due to chance, said Dr. Andrea Fenaughty, the epidemiologist with the Department of Health and Social Services who conducted the study.

Dr. Ward Hurlburt, Alaska's Chief Medical Officer, calls childhood obesity the predominant public health threat of this generation. It's also an expensive threat: Alaskans spend an estimated \$459 million on obesity-related medical expenses every year; about 25 percent of that is paid through government programs, such as Medicaid and Medicare. About three of every 10 children in Alaska are overweight or obese; about two out of three adults in Alaska weigh too much. Obese children are more likely than children of healthy weight to experience health problems, such as diabetes and asthma. They may struggle academically, socially and emotionally. Due to obesity, today's generation of children may be the first to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents, Hurlburt said.

"I am very encouraged by the decrease in the prevalence of overweight children in our state's largest city," said Hurlburt. "The Anchorage School District has implemented important physical activity and nutrition changes, and my department is taking several actions to address overweight and obesity among children. We need to expand our efforts and change the focus on obesity from a concern for appearance to a concern for health."

Between 1998 and 2011, trained school staff collected heights and weights from students in all grades as a part of routine health screenings. Over the 1998-1999 through 2010-2011 school years, 263,370 height and weight values were analyzed. DHSS data analysts used these measurements to calculate body mass index (BMI), an indicator of body fat and risk of obesity-related health

problems. The height and weight values collected during the past 13 school years represent 41 percent of total student enrollment in the district.

Hurlburt presented the following key findings to the Anchorage School Board Monday night:

- Between the 1998-99 and 2010-11 school years, the prevalence of overweight and obesity among Anchorage School District students increased from 32 percent to 36 percent.
- During those 13 school years, however, the prevalence hit a peak and then started a decline. It increased between 1998-99 and 2002-03, when the prevalence of overweight and obese students jumped from 32 percent to 38 percent, but then improved between 2002-03 and 2010-11, when the prevalence fell from 38 percent to 36 percent.
- The problem of excessive weight began before school started; about 33 percent of 3- to 5- year-old children were above a healthy weight during the 2010-11 school year.

During the years of the height and weight study, the Anchorage School District banned the sale of junk food and soda in schools, adopted a wellness policy, and increased the amount of elementary physical education provided each week.

“I am very pleased to see this decrease in the obesity rates of our students. We have worked very hard to focus on changing our emphasis to lifelong physical fitness and wellness as essential to a great life,” said Carol Comeau, Superintendent of the Anchorage School District. “I want to commend our staff and students for making big strides forward. I know that we have a long way to go, but if we continue to focus on healthy eating, regular exercise and sleep, and getting out-of-doors to enjoy Alaska, our students and staff will continue to make progress.”

The Department of Health and Social Services has expanded its partnerships with schools districts, collecting student height and weight data from districts in Anchorage, and the Mat-Su and Kenai Peninsula boroughs. The department partnered with Healthy Futures to promote more extracurricular physical activity among K-6 students in Alaska schools. This spring, 110 schools — 45 in the Anchorage School District — signed up for the Healthy Futures Physical Activity Challenge. Almost 7,000 students participated throughout Alaska, with 3,770 attending schools in the Anchorage School District. The department also launched its Play Every Day public education campaign to raise awareness about childhood obesity in Alaska and encourage children and their families to be more physically active for good health.

A complete report about the prevalence of overweight and obese Anchorage students is posted at <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/obesity/resources.htm>, or you can download the report here: <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/pubs/assets/ChroniclesV4-2.pdf>.

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