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Drop in youth obesity epidemic tied to public health investments

New report finds a 17 percent decrease in youth obesity in King County school districts that participated in large-scale local public health initiative

New findings published today by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that youth obesity dropped in low-income school districts that were part of a King County-focused obesity prevention initiative. By increasing healthy food choices and opportunities for physical activity such as improving the quality of physical education, the initiative boosted healthy habits for middle and high school students. These results have promising implications for statewide and national strategies to improve community health.

The report shows a 17 percent decline in youth obesity in King County (from 9.5 percent to 7.9 percent) after Public Health – Seattle & King County partnered with schools and community organizations to implement a two year Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) obesity prevention initiative ending in 2012. While youth obesity rates fell significantly in CPPW initiative school districts, (Auburn, Highline, Kent, Northshore, Renton, Seattle and Tukwila) rates remained the same in districts not involved in the initiative and were also unchanged in the rest of the state.

“This successful approach to reducing childhood obesity is a model for our state and our nation,” said King County Executive Dow Constantine. “It is an excellent example of how we can make our children and, ultimately, our communities healthier by focusing our combined resources on prevention. Overcoming the social inequity we see in King County starts with today’s children, and we’re seeing positive results.”

Statewide, obesity and overweight rates for 10th graders have remained steady for the past decade. The state’s Healthy Youth Survey found that about 23 percent of 10th graders are overweight or obese.

“We must do all we can to improve the health of our next generation,” said Governor Jay Inslee. “These results in King County show that public health prevention activities can make a difference and we have a good start. Yet, there’s much more to do. Effective programs to support healthy, active kids are crucial to the future health of our state.”

Investing in children’s health now could lead to lower health care costs. This is at the heart of Governor Inslee’s Healthiest Next Generation legislation that supports healthy schools, healthy child care and early learning centers, and promotes breastfeeding-friendly environments.

Other prevention initiatives around the state also show promise. For example, a school district in Skagit County has a new one-mile walk zone around each school, allowing kids to walk to school safely and saving the district money on busing. A school district in Benton County made healthy changes to their school lunch program that still appeal to kids and each school now has a salad bar.

"Children today are not as healthy as their parents were when they were kids. We must change that, and these programs show we can," said Washington State Secretary of Health John Wiesman. "Programs like these could be a turning point in fighting the obesity epidemic. Together, we can seize the moment by investing in strategies that promote healthier weight for children who'll be able to live longer, enter the workforce healthier, and reduce costs for health care and businesses."

"Our local obesity prevention initiative took a comprehensive approach, from nutrition standards for school meals and student-led healthy eating and active living promotional campaigns to farm-to-school programs and high-quality physical education," said Dr. David Fleming, Director and Health Officer for Public Health – Seattle & King County. "These promising results show the potential for public health to stop the obesity epidemic and prevent our children from living shorter lives than we do, a current fear of many experts."

Examples of obesity prevention initiative activities in King County schools:

- In Auburn, CPPW led to the Commit to Fit Campaign that galvanized students to eat healthier foods and be more active. "We saw the entire district get involved in various ways with the initiative. We had over 6,000 students track their nutrition and physical activity changes," said Auburn High School teacher Lori Jacobs.
- Seattle Public Schools established a model physical education program. "When funding was awarded, 75 percent of the equipment that had been at the school had to be thrown away and I had almost zero teaching supplies. The equipment from this grant was critical to my program," said Chellie Lafayette, Physical Education Specialist at Roxhill Elementary.
- Highline Schools promoted nutritious food in their school meals. "We worked directly with our students to develop an innovative marketing campaign in the school cafeterias to promote healthy choices. Now, our 11,000 students that eat lunch in our cafeterias every day have the information they need to make better choices," said Chris Neal, Director of Nutrition Services at Highline Schools.

"Preventing obesity is about more than individual choices. It takes positive changes in the places where people live, learn, work and play to make a difference," said Dr. Jim Krieger, Chief of Chronic Disease at Public Health - Seattle & King County. "We focused this initiative on low-income school districts because their youth obesity rates are higher."

About the report data: Youth obesity data are from the Washington State Healthy Youth Survey conducted in grades 8, 10 and 12. The full MMWR report is available at www.cdc.gov/mmwr/

More on CPPW: www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/partnerships/CPPW.aspx

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