

Mat-Su schools report some success in battling obesity

LESS OBESE: Physical activities, fewer fats, sweets reducing weight.

By ROSEMARY SHINOHARA
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The Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District may be having some success tackling obesity. The first report from a seven-year study shows a drop in the rate of overweight or obese students from 32 percent to 26 percent.

The Mat-Su district is doing things like removing soda machines from schools, offering free breakfasts to all students so they don't get overly-hungry and eat junk food, and talking up healthy eating in physical education classes and the nursing office, said district spokeswoman Catherine Esary. There's a push to provide before- and after-school activities ranging from jump rope groups to dance clubs, she said.

"It's just been a progressive build."

Obesity is considered a major health problem nationally for both children and adults. Diabetes, heart disease, asthma, some cancers and other diseases are tied into being obese.

And a fat child is more likely than other kids to turn into a fat adult. The rate of obesity for U.S. adults has been climbing steeply since the 1980s, when the rate was 13 percent, the report says. Now it's one-third of the population.

The Mat-Su District and the state Division of Public Health collaborated on the study of Valley pupils, which was released Wednesday.

The Mat-Su district collected height-weight numbers from students in kindergarten and grades 1, 3, 5 and 7. The report covers the 2002-2003 school year through the 2009-2010 year.

It is the first such effort in the Valley, and the second combined state-school district look at obesity. The first was in Anchorage. Homer is next.

The Anchorage study of all grades found much higher overweight and obese rates, at 36 percent. The trend over 10 years in Anchorage showed the rate of overweight students climbing from 1989 to 2003, from a low of 30 percent to a high of 38 percent; then a drop back down to 36 percent. The most recent Anchorage report includes the 2007-2008 school year.

The Anchorage district has also tried to combat obesity by getting rid of sodas in machines, increasing elementary students' gym time and the like.

Both Anchorage and Mat-Su studies found that many children are already in trouble weight-wise when they enter school in kindergarten or first grade.

The studies cover different grade levels and are not directly comparable as they stand, but the state plans to separate out comparable information, said Andrea Fenaughty, a state epidemiologist and one of the authors of the report. The state also intends to figure out which policies are most successful in the Valley, and why there might be such a difference between Anchorage and the Valley.

When state researchers saw the numbers in Mat-Su, "The first thing we said is what are they doing?" Fenaughty said.

"It turns out when you look at what the CDC says are best practices, they're doing almost every one and have been for a long time," Fenaughty said. "Right now it looks like the beginning of a decline."

CDC is the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The nationally recommended "best practices" include steps such as offering more fruits, vegetables and water to students, requiring that students be active at least half the time in gym classes, and ramping up requirements that students actually take P.E.

The Mat-Su district offers high-quality physical education, opportunities for physical activity during and after school, and healthy food choices for both snacks and meals, says the state report.

A 2005 Mat-Su policy change "essentially eliminated access to high fat, high calorie, high sugar foods and sugar-sweetened beverages ... on school campus," except sports drinks, the report says.

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School lunches, breakfasts vital to state**COMPASS: Other points of view**

By MICHAEL SOBOCINSKI

(03/08/10 19:18:14)



"How many more sleeps before we can have meals at school again?"

An elementary school student in the Kenai Peninsula asked her teacher this question recently, just before a long weekend. For this girl and her younger brother, one of the most important things that school provided them was reliable breakfast and lunch.

Congress created the School Lunch Program in 1946 "as a measure of national security" because too many young men were unfit for military service due to malnutrition. The School Breakfast Program was piloted in 1966 and made permanent in 1975. The experience of the Kenai girl, and many others besides, shows that these programs are still vitally needed.

Schools are not required to offer meals, although the federal government provides reimbursement for meals for low income children. Forty percent of Alaska students -- more than 45,000 children -- qualify for free or reduced cost school meals.

Despite the huge geographic and logistic challenges they face, to their credit most schools in Alaska offer lunch. In all, there are 10 school districts educating 1,698 students in Alaska that do not offer the lunch program.

However, breakfast is more of a challenge. One hundred four Alaska schools and eight school districts that offer lunch do not offer breakfast. In total, 15 percent of the students who qualify for free/reduced price school meals do not attend schools that offer a breakfast program -- that's more than 7,000 missed meals each day, more than 1.2 million a year.



Why doesn't every Alaska school offer breakfast and lunch? They cannot afford it. The federal reimbursement is too low to make it economical for schools that serve too few children overall, or too few low income children, or face high food costs because of their remote locations.

Our kids need these meals. While I suspect we would all agree that parents should feed their children, some simply can't. According to Hunger in America 2010, 74,000 Alaskans seek food assistance each year. A significant percentage of these households include children younger than 18.

Children who have breakfast at school attend school more regularly, perform better on standardized tests, pay better attention, and perform better in math and reading. They are less likely to be disruptive or violent, and are less likely to struggle with obesity. In other words, meals at school encourage kids to concentrate on the business of learning, even older children.

On the other hand, teens who are hungry are more likely to be suspended from school, to have difficulty getting along with others, and to have fewer friends. The schools know this, which is why even many schools who don't offer breakfast regularly still manage to offer breakfast during testing week.

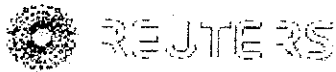
The Alaska Senate is currently considering whether to provide state funds to match federal funds

for school meals -- which will make it more economical to provide school meals. To me this is a very straightforward decision that we can make, one that will directly impact the health and education of our children. We should make such a reasonable investment in our children's future, and help give every child the best chance to succeed in school. I am sure that the young girl on the Kenai would agree. Please encourage your legislators to support SB 213 -- for the children and their academic future.

Michael Sobocinski is a board member of the Food Bank of Alaska.

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School lunch programs might break poverty cycle

Tue, Nov 23 2010

By Adam Marcus

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Teens who live in households where food is scarce suffer academically, but a new study has found that government programs to provide meals in schools can reverse this effect.

According to the researchers, the findings suggest that school programs aimed at reducing so-called food insecurity can break an insidious cycle of poverty: poor children go hungry, get bad grades, don't go on to college and fail to rise out of their socioeconomic status -- raising children whose lives follow the same unfortunate narrative.

"Food insecurity is more problematic in the long term if it occurs prior to adolescence, but it doesn't mean that adolescents are more resilient than younger children," said study leader Christelle Roustit, of the Research Group on the Social Determinants of Health and Healthcare, in Paris, France. The researchers reported their findings in the medical journal *Pediatrics*.

The severe recession has taken a toll on food security. In the United States, a recent report by the Department of Agriculture found that nearly 15% of American households faced food insecurity at some point in 2009, the highest level since officials began tracking the measure in 1995.

Food insecurity in childhood is thought to undercut scholastic achievement in at least two ways. It deprives the body of nutrients necessary for proper mental and physical development, and it creates an atmosphere of stress and uncertainty that saps a kid's desire to attend school and to perform well.

In the new study, Roustit and her colleagues analyzed questionnaires given to 2,346 public high school students in Quebec, Canada, along with nearly 2,000 of their parents. The surveys asked about issues of school performance and socioeconomic status and included several questions addressing food security at home. These included whether a lack of money prevented the family from eating enough, or from buying a sufficient variety of foods.

Just over 11 percent of teens in the study experienced food insecurity at home, according to the researchers. Of those, two-thirds attended schools that offered free or low-cost breakfast, lunch or snacks, allowing the researchers to look for an effect of the meals program on academic performance.

The study revealed that food insecurity was strongly associated with problems in school. However, children with food insecurity at home performed significantly better academically if their school offered meal assistance. They were much less likely to be held back a year, to score badly in language testing or to rate their overall academic performance as poor.

Although the data come from the 1990s, Roustit said a new survey of Quebec adolescents is now in progress. "We would be able to compare the results of 1999 to 2009 in few years," she said.

Nicola Edwards, a dietician and food policy expert at California Food Policy Advocates, an Oakland-based nonprofit, said the results of the study are unsurprising. If children are hungry they cannot learn, Edwards said. "There is a direct correlation between food insecurity and academic performance," she said.

In the United States, teachers and school administrators report that children who take advantage of food assistance programs in schools have improved behavior, fewer absences and better test scores, Edwards added.

Under the federal Child Nutrition Act, more than 31 million American school children receive free or inexpensive lunches through the National School Lunch Program. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level (\$28,665 for a family of four) are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level (\$40,793 for a family of four) are eligible to receive lunch for a cost of no more than 40 cents.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the National School Lunch Program cost \$9.8 billion in 2009. A study of this program that was published earlier this year supports the Canadian findings. Dr. Peter Hinrichs at Georgetown University in Washington DC reported in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* that for children who participate in the National School Lunch Program, "the effects on educational attainment are sizable."

SOURCES: link.reuters.com/xyz76q *Pediatrics* online November 22, 2010 and link.reuters.com/syz76q *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, online June 3, 2010.

December 2, 2010

Congress Approves Child Nutrition Bill

By ROBERT PEAR

WASHINGTON — Congress gave final approval on Thursday to a child nutrition bill that expands the school lunch program and sets new standards to improve the quality of school meals, with more fruits and vegetables.

Michelle Obama lobbied for the bill as a way to combat obesity and hunger. About half of the \$4.5 billion cost is financed by a cut in food stamps starting in several years.

Mrs. Obama said she was thrilled by passage of what she described as a groundbreaking piece of legislation.

By a vote of 264 to 157, the House on Thursday passed the bill, which was approved in the Senate by unanimous consent in August. It goes now to President Obama, who intends to sign it.

On the final roll call, 247 Democrats and 17 Republicans voted for the bill. Four Democrats and 153 Republicans voted no.

Some liberal House Democrats and advocates for the poor railed against the bill in September, saying it was wrong to pay for the expansion of child nutrition programs by cutting money for food stamps, now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Democrats put aside their disagreements on Thursday, after concluding that it was better to take what they could get than to gamble on their chances in the next Congress when Republicans will control the House. Mr. Obama tamped down concern by telling Democrats he would work with them to find other ways to pay for the bill, before the cuts in food stamps take effect.

"The president will do everything he can to restore these unconscionable cuts," said Representative Barbara Lee, Democrat of California and chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Democrats and a few Republicans praised Mrs. Obama. "She has been an incredible champion for our children, particularly in the areas of nutrition and obesity," said Representative Jim McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts.

Mr. McGovern, who is co-chairman of the House Hunger Caucus, said: "Hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin. Highly processed, empty-calorie foods are less expensive than fresh nutritious foods."

School meal programs have a major impact on the nation's health, and supporters of the bill said it could reduce the prevalence of obesity among children. The lunch program feeds more than 31 million children a day.

Representative Rosa DeLauro, Democrat of Connecticut, said, "The bill sets national nutrition standards that will finally get all of the junk food infiltrating our classrooms and our cafeterias out the door."

But Representative Paul Broun, Republican of Georgia and a physician, said: "This bill is

not about child nutrition. It's not about healthy kids. It's about an expansion of the federal government, more and more control from Washington, borrowing more money and putting our children in greater debt. The federal government has no business setting nutritional standards and telling families what they should and should not eat."

The bill gives the secretary of agriculture authority to establish nutrition standards for foods sold in schools during the school day, including items in vending machines. The standards would require schools to serve more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products.

And for the first time in more than three decades, the bill would increase federal reimbursement for school lunches beyond inflation — to help cover the cost of higher-quality meals. It would also allow more than 100,000 children on Medicaid to qualify automatically for free school meals.

One of the most contentious provisions of the bill regulates prices for lunches served to children with family incomes over 185 percent of the poverty level (more than \$40,793 a year for a family of four).

"This provision would require some schools to raise their lunch prices," the Congressional Budget Office said.

Representative John Kline, Republican of Minnesota, said this provision was tantamount to a tax increase on middle-class families. The National Governors Association and local school officials objected to it as a new federal mandate.

But Margo G. Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a research and advocacy group, said: "The price of paid lunches needs to go up. Schools are not charging enough to cover the cost. As a result, money intended to provide healthy food to low-income kids is being diverted to subsidize food for higher-income children."

School districts that comply with the new standards can receive an additional federal payment of 6 cents for each lunch served. The National School Boards Association, representing local board members, said "the actual increased cost of compliance" was at least twice that amount. The bill was written mainly by Senator Blanche Lincoln, Democrat of Arkansas and chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, who lost her bid for re-election.

The bill rounds out the tenure of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Democrat of California. When she took the gavel in January 2007, she was surrounded by the children of House members, and she called the House to order in the name of "all America's children."