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Percentage of obese students decreases slightly in the Anchorage metropolitan area
Despite decline, childhood obesity is still the No. 1 public health threat of this generation

ANCHORAGE — A new analysis of height and weight measurements for thousands of children in two large Alaska school districts — Anchorage and Mat-Su Borough — shows that the rate of obesity decreased slightly between the 2003–04 and 2010–11 school years. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) featured these findings today in its nationally released Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

After many decades of increases in the prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States, recent reports like the one issued today by the CDC show obesity prevalence is stabilizing in some groups of children and is declining in selected areas of the country, including the region that includes the Anchorage and Matanuska-Susitna Borough school districts.

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services has been working with individual school districts to study obesity trends among Alaska children. This study was the first one that combined data from two large districts: Anchorage and Mat-Su. During the eight-year time period of this study, the overall prevalence of obesity among Anchorage and Mat-Su children fell 3 percent from 16.8 percent to 16.3 percent. “This is a small, but statistically significant, decline. That means the decrease is not likely to be due to chance,” said Dr. Andrea Fenaughty, a department epidemiologist who worked on the study with Program Design and Evaluation Services in Oregon.

The study looked at body mass index data for Anchorage and Mat-Su public school children in kindergarten and first, third, fifth and seventh grades. Body mass index, or BMI, is calculated using a person’s height and weight and is a good indicator of that person’s body fat and risk of obesity-related health problems.

The CDC report notes that despite the overall decline in obesity rates in these two schools districts, the obesity rates did not decrease for two groups: Alaska Native and American Indian children and children attending schools that report lower socioeconomic status for their families.

“It is great news to see the slight decline in obesity among Anchorage and Mat-Su children, but we still have much work to do to address the unequal impact of obesity on some children more than others,” said Dr. Ward Hurlburt, Alaska’s Chief Medical Officer. “Childhood obesity is the predominant public health threat facing this generation, and it will take all of us working together to improve the health of our children.”

DHSS continues to expand its partnerships with school districts across Alaska. The department and school district staff work together to collect student height and weight data from districts in Anchorage, the Mat-Su and Kenai Peninsula boroughs, and Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka. The department also partners with Healthy Futures to promote more extracurricular physical activity among K–6 students in Alaska schools. This spring, 136 schools across the state signed up for the Healthy Futures Physical Activity Challenge and a record 10,424 individual children participated. The department also runs the [Play Every Day](#) public education campaign to raise awareness about childhood obesity and motivate Alaska children and their families to be more physically active for good health.

Reports about the prevalence of overweight and obese students in several Alaska schools districts are posted online at <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Pages/Obesity/resources.aspx> under the headline “Studies.” The CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report is online here, http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/mmwr_wk/wk_cvol.html, and the Anchorage article is here, http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6221a4.htm?s_cid=mm6221a4_w.

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