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Local doctor to spread the word on HEAL-ing

By [Mitch Fryer](#)

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An apple instead of apple pie; sit-ups over sitting on the couch -- children in Armstrong County are starting to make better health choices, thanks to a unique school-based project aimed at reducing and preventing childhood obesity and its related health risks.

The project, known as HEAL (Healthy Eating, Active Lifestyles) Armstrong, is a collaboration of UPMC Health Plan, Children's Community Pediatrics Armstrong, ACMH Hospital's Armstrong Center for Medicine and Health, the ACMH Hospital Foundation, the Armstrong School District, Armstrong YMCA and Belmont Complex.

Its goal is to reduce childhood obesity in the county by educating children and families about healthy lifestyles through in-school, after-school and community programs.

Now, Armstrong County's pilot program is about to get national attention.

"This is a unique program because of its scope. It's the only program of its kind that involves an entire county," said Armstrong County pediatrician, Dr. Kiran Bhat, an adviser for the program.

Bhat, general pediatrician with Children's Community Pediatrics Armstrong, will present the county's unique wellness initiative at the American Academy of Pediatrics' "Future of Pediatrics Conference: Community Pediatrics, Medical, Home and Beyond" next week in Orlando.

"I'm looking forward to sharing the details of our program with a broader audience," he said. "I hope people there get excited about it and ask questions. Maybe use it as their model."

An estimated 35 percent of children in the Armstrong School District -- about 2,200 students -- have a body mass index (BMI) showing that they are heavier than 85 percent of children of their age and gender nationally, according to the first survey taken by program officials last year.

They said that since planning for the program began more than two years ago, the district has changed its menu to offer healthier foods and has eliminated soft drinks from vending machines. Most schools now have in-school wellness programs and after-school programs in development.

"Although we don't expect to see results until three or four years from now, I do think there is already a positive shift toward a healthier lifestyle in Armstrong County," Bhat said.

Last year, UPMC Health Plan awarded a \$50,000 grant to Heal Armstrong in support of the program. The American Academy of Pediatrics awarded a Community Access To Child Health (CATCH) grant to implement the project.

"More than \$20,000 has been contributed by our foundation toward this initiative since 2005," said Patty Shiring, executive director of the ACMH Hospital Foundation. "We are proud to be involved in this unique collaboration that will bring wellness to Armstrong County."

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