

# LEADER TIMES

## 2K Wellness Walk designed to encourage children's activity

By Renatta Signorini

Leader Times

Tuesday, September 25, 2007

The scales are tipping in favor of Armstrong County -- but that's not necessarily a positive thing.

With about one-third Armstrong School District's students considered overweight or at risk of being overweight combined with the county's rural setting, the future of many children could be in jeopardy.

Long bus rides mixed with a lack of health education and fresh foods in some areas could be indicators of why research has shown that rural students are more likely to be overweight than their urban counterparts.

More than 35 percent of Armstrong School District kindergarteners through sixth-graders are heavier than 85 percent of children the same age and gender nationally, compared to the national average of about 19 percent, according to a survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics.

Various community groups have combined efforts to combat the rising numbers of overweight children and accompanying health risks with HEALTHY Armstrong -- Healthy Eating and Active Lifestyles, Together Helping Youth. The program will kick off Thursday, and a 2K Wellness Walk is scheduled for Saturday.

Patty Shiring, executive director of the ACMH Hospital Foundation, said she hopes that bringing nutrition education into schools and introducing exercise in a fun way will lead to lifestyle changes for many of the county's families.

"It comes down to input and output," she said.

About 16 percent of urban students were considered overweight compared to 20 percent of rural students, according to a 2005 study by The Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

The Body Mass Indexes of more than 25,000 rural and urban students in Pennsylvania were compared with state health figures between 1999 and 2001. Researchers found that the number of rural students considered overweight increased almost five percent during that time, while the same factor increased two percent among urban students.

A BMI calculates a person's weight-to-height ratio.

The study's findings intrigued other researchers to explain the weight disparity between urban and rural students, said Kai Schafft, associate professor at Pennsylvania State University and director of the Center on Rural Education and Communities.

Preliminary research has involved the mapping of what Schafft described as "food deserts" throughout the state. A food desert is an area with limited access to full-service grocery stores, he said

In those areas, residents are less likely to have access to fresh food, he said. Consequently, residents may have to depend on convenience stores, fast-food restaurants and processed, high-caloric food, he said.

The preliminary research Schafft conducted with colleague Clare Hinrichs showed that people are more likely to be overweight in food desert areas, he said.

Weight issues in rural areas could point to many factors, Schafft said -- a lack of sidewalks, health education or healthy restaurants and an increase of television watching or sedentary activities.

"The common stereotype of rural residents being active with farming is an outdated misconception," he said.

No Child Left Behind could affect student weight increases in rural areas, he said. In an effort to boost test scores and meet standards, some schools may cut back on what are considered nonessential classes, he said, including physical education.

A long travel time on a school bus can be a contributing factor, he said.

The incorporation of wellness policies, BMI tests and healthier meals into the school day are proof that risks are rising for students.

"For better or for worse, times have changed," Schafft said.

Years ago, children played outside with friends, he said. Now safety is an issue and children spend more time indoors.

"As a culture, I think that we're just far more sedentary than we were 20 years ago," he said.

HEALTHY Armstrong was created when county pediatrician Dr. Kiran Bhat presented the hospital with his observations of increased health-related risks due to rising weight in children, Shiring said.

Armstrong School District, ACMH Hospital and its foundation, Children's Community Pediatrics - Armstrong and UPMC Health Plan are partners in HEALTHY Armstrong.

The program incorporates the National Institutes for Health's "We Can!" wellness program and Armstrong has been named the nation's first "We Can!" county.

Many ailments normally reserved for adults, such as diabetes and heart disease, have been appearing in children, she said. While citing a doctor, Shiring said that if children continue to be diagnosed with life-shortening ailments, their parents may begin to outlive them.

Schafft said schools play an important role in promoting a healthy lifestyle.

"In rural areas, schools are the center of a community," he said.

By working carefully to not only provide healthy foods to students, but see to it that the same ideals make it into community homes, "I think that's potentially a really positive thing," he said.

**If you go:**

Win By Walking 2K Wellness Walk (1 1/2 miles)

ACMH Hospital

Saturday

Registration at 8 a.m.

Warm-up at 8:45

Call 724-543-8850 or e-mail [shiringp@acmh.org](mailto:shiringp@acmh.org) for information.

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