

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

## **We can! ... eat better, exercise more and spend less time watching TV, program encourages**

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*By Jack Kelly, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*



*Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette*

*Children from Martin Luther King Accelerated Learning Academy exercise with UPMC's Chrystie Alex at the Pittsburgh Children's Museum during yesterday's launch of We Can!, an acronym for Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition.*

Pittsburgh is one of nine cities nationwide to be designated a We Can! city by the National Institutes of Health.

We Can!, an acronym for Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition, is an education program to fight childhood obesity by encouraging children to eat healthier, exercise more and spend less time watching television or playing video games.

The campaign was kicked off in Pittsburgh with a news conference at the Children's Museum featuring Dr. Susan Shurin, deputy director of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute at NIH.

About two-thirds of adults are overweight, and half of them are obese, a number that has tripled since 1980, Dr. Shurin said.

Only about 30 percent of children are overweight or obese -- half the adult rate -- but the proportion of children who are overweight has been growing much faster than for adults, said Roger Oxendale, president of Children's Hospital.

"Twenty years ago, only one in 20 of the children we saw were clinically obese," he said.

Overweight kids tend to become overweight adults, said Dr. Shurin, a pediatrician.

"It's not just the proximate problem of childhood obesity but the continuing problem as adults," she said.

Children's Hospital, the UPMC Health Plan, and the H.J. Heinz Co. are partners with the city of Pittsburgh in the We Can! initiative.

Armstrong County was the first Pennsylvania community to take part in the NIH initiative. With a grant of \$10,000, a pilot project was begun in Elderton Elementary School, where 35 percent of the children were overweight or obese, said Dr. Kiran Bhat, 38, a pediatrician who headed the effort there.

Soda was removed from the vending machines in the school, Dr. Bhat said, and the menu in the cafeteria was changed to give children healthier choices.

"In the winter, the kids just sat around all day," Dr. Bhat said. "Now, we have them walk in the hallways for 30 minutes each day."

Elderton also instituted an after-school counseling session once a week for students and their parents, Dr. Bhat said. About a quarter of the student body attends, he said.

At the news conference yesterday, UPMC presented the Children's Museum with a \$25,000 check to finance We Can! activities there. The money will be used to provide exercise sessions twice a week, and a once-a-week counseling session for parents, said Jane Werner, executive director of the museum.

To be designated a We Can! city, a city must issue a mayoral proclamation announcing the effort, provide nutrition and fitness information to city employees and implement four or more of the programs the NIH recommends for young people.

The other We Can! cities besides Pittsburgh are Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Memphis, Oak Ridge, Tenn., Rockford, Ill., and Carson City, Nev.

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