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Slimming down is goal of We Can!

*By Bill Zlatos
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*Christie Alex (center), Health Promotion Specialist with UPMC Health Plan, leads third-grade students from the Pittsburgh King Accelerated Learning Academy in exercise Thursday at the Children's Museum in the North Side. To kick off the We Can! program against childhood obesity, students performed a chicken dance and demonstrated exercises.
Heidi Murrin/Tribune-Review*

Pittsburgh is joining eight other cities in a federal program to help kids slim down by eating smart, exercising more and spending less time watching television or playing video games.

"When people carry too much weight, especially children, it puts them at risk for all kinds of problems, especially diabetes," said Diane P. Holder, president of UPMC Health Plan.

She spoke Thursday at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, where she presented a \$25,000 check to museum Executive Director Jane Werner to launch We Can!, a National Institutes of Health program to combat childhood obesity.

We Can! -- or Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition -- is one of many approaches Pittsburgh is using to help children maintain a healthy weight.

The North Side museum will use the money to offer nutrition and exercise programs for families. Partners say the museum program is the first of many to fight youth obesity.

The NIH started We Can! two years ago to help children between the ages of 8 and 13 maintain a proper weight. The institutes offer participating communities technical assistance, access to scientific resources and materials to promote a healthy lifestyle.

Besides the museum and the health plan, other local partners include Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, Children's Community Pediatrics in Armstrong County, the city of Pittsburgh and H.J. Heinz Co.

Roger Oxendale, president of Children's Hospital, said obese children are at risk for Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and the early signs of cardiovascular disease.

A review of medical records from 49 counties in the region showed that the number of overweight children increased from 32.7 percent in 2002 to 39 percent in 2004, said Janice Seigle, strategic corporate initiatives director for the Highmark health insurance provider.

To kick off We Can!, students performed a chicken dance and demonstrated exercises.

Emma Cooper, 11, of Fox Chapel said she dances, swims, rides her bike and runs to stay in shape.

"If you don't," she said, "you might be tired and you might not have enough energy."

Other cities joining the campaign include Boston; Los Angeles; New York; Las Vegas; Memphis; Oak Ridge, Tenn.; Rockford, Ill.; and Carson City, Nev.

Highmark has dedicated \$100 million over five years to nutrition, physical activity, self-esteem, grieving and bullying.

The Jewish Healthcare Foundation of Pittsburgh has worked with the city school board to develop policies that encourage proper nutrition.

The foundation gave Children's Hospital a grant to train doctors how to talk to their children about their weight problems.

The Pittsburgh Foundation has given a two-year grant of \$100,000 to Sarah Heinz House in the North Side. It will use the money to teach children about nutrition and encourage them to be active.

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