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News Release

Study Finds Progress in Fight against Obesity among City School Students

Rates of obesity and severe obesity among Philadelphia school children decreased significantly between 2006 and 2010, according to a study conducted by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health and published in *Preventing Chronic Disease*, a journal of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The study, based on height and weight data collected by nurses in the School District of Philadelphia, revealed a 5 percent decline in obesity rates among children five to eighteen years-of-age. Significantly, the study also found an 8 percent decrease in obesity rates among African American boys and a 7 percent decrease among Hispanic girls.

There were similar decreases in the levels of *severe* obesity among school children. Severe obesity can lead to serious complications during childhood, such as high blood pressure, high insulin levels, lipid disorders, and psychosocial distress.

The findings in this study were based on data for approximately 120,000 Philadelphia children and mirror recent trends seen in California and New York City. However, the larger decreases among certain racial/ethnic groups had not been seen elsewhere and are notable here.

"Our Administration has made great strides to address and reduce obesity in both children and adults," said Mayor Michael A. Nutter. "These reductions in obesity and severe obesity in children are a step in the right direction. We will continue to focus on the problem of obesity to help ensure that Philadelphians can live long, healthy and productive lives."

While the study documented declines in obesity for nearly all age, gender, and racial/ethnic groups, the reductions were smallest for high school students, Hispanic boys, and African American girls.

"These findings should make us hopeful that change is possible but humbled by the magnitude of the problem we still face," said Dr. Donald Schwarz, Health Commissioner for the City of Philadelphia.

The journal article did not assess the cause for such declines but cited some potential contributors.

Over the past decade, significant national attention has been devoted to addressing childhood obesity by government agencies, schools, community organizations, and the private sector. Locally, in 1999, the School District of Philadelphia began offering nutrition education to all SNAP-eligible students through USDA funding and in partnership with local universities and non-profits.

Between 2004 and 2006, the school district worked with child health advocates to implement one of the most comprehensive nutrition policies in the country, including removal of sugary drinks from vending machines. In 2007 and 2008, Philadelphia City Council passed a trans-fat ban and the nation's toughest menu labeling law.

In 2009, school cafeterias replaced two-percent fat milk with one-percent milk and removed kitchen fryers, while Mayor Nutter issued a Complete Streets

executive order aimed at making it easier for residents to commute actively by walking or biking.

"Efforts to make the healthy choice the easy choice can lead to improved health," said Dr. Giridhar Mallya, Director of Policy and Planning for the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH).

To build on these successes, in 2010, with Stimulus-funded support from the CDC, PDPH launched *Get Healthy Philly*, a citywide initiative designed to encourage healthy eating and active living. While Get Healthy Philly was implemented after the time period of this study, it extended the public health approaches taken in the prior decade. Get Healthy Philly accomplishments include:

- Establishing Wellness Councils in 171 schools, enabling teachers, students, and principals to put healthy policies intro practice;
- Developing food and fitness standards for City-operated afterschool and recreation programs, serving 20,000 low-income children;
- Installing 9.7 miles of new dedicated bicycle lanes, 6.7 miles of buffered bike lanes, 2.0 miles of Green bicycle lanes, and 8.9 miles of "sharrows" or shared bicycle lanes;
- Creating the nation's largest healthy corner store network through which more than 600 corner stores are promoting and selling produce, whole grains, and low-fat dairy; and
- Launching a media education initiative that was seen or heard more than 40 million times and led to an increase in parents' knowledge about the links between sugary drinks, weight gain, and diabetes.

Details of these and other anti-obesity initiatives can be found at www.phila.gov/gethealthyphilly and www.foodfitphilly.org. The full study can be read at www.cdc.gov/pcd.

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