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Study: 1 in 3 Granite State third-graders is overweight: Schools work hard to help them eat healthier foods

DOVER — One in three third-graders statewide has been found to be obese or overweight, according to the Childhood Obesity in New Hampshire 2008-2009 report, released Tuesday by the New Hampshire Obesity Prevention Program.

The report, released in recognition of Healthy Weight Week (Jan. 16-22), cited the findings of New Hampshire third-graders in the "Healthy Smiles & Healthy Growth survey."

The report also suggests ways to help reduce the risk of obesity, but many schools in the region have already put into place programs that promote a healthy lifestyle.

Elementary schools in Dover and Rochester are using the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables program to introduce healthy eating habits to students at a young age.

The program, funded by a government grant, allows the schools to serve students fresh fruits and vegetables for free during snack time. Tom Tanner, director of dining services for the Rochester school system, said students have already tried foods like cantaloupe, pineapple, kiwi, broccoli, pea pods and red pepper strips.

"It encourages the children to try it, and they like it," he said. "It's things the kids might not normally try."

Tanner said the program is already being implemented at six of the eight elementary schools in the district.

Mark Covell, food service director for the city of Dover, said Woodman Park School is in its second year of the program and that it has been so successful, they are going to establish it at Garrison and Horne Street schools in the first or second week of February. He said the only difference is that the snacks would not be free and there would be a small charge.

Somersworth and Portsmouth elementary schools have been using the 5210 program to help prevent childhood obesity.

The 5210 program stands for five fruits and vegetables a day; two hours or less of screen time such as computers, television and cellphones; one hour of exercise; and zero sodas or sweets.

Jenna Tousignant, school nurse at Maplewood Elementary in Somersworth, said the school has teamed up with Salmon Falls Family Healthcare on the program and provides incentives for students such as bracelets, pencils and T-shirts.

"It seems like it's working well," Tousignant said about the program. "Kids are more aware. I give kids stickers if they have fruits and vegetables, and I have been handing out more stickers than

when I started."

In Portsmouth, Pat Laska, nutrition director for the schools, said the 5210 program was started in the middle school last year and that January will be concentrated on starting it in the elementary schools.

Laska said they are trying to implement the steps one at a time and will start by educating and having students eat five fruits and vegetables a day. She said the superintendent is hoping to have teachers bring the program into the classroom to provide further education.

"If they teach kids about fruits and vegetables (students) will go home to their parents and maybe ask them to buy clementines," she explained.

"It becomes a habit with them," Tanner said of starting teaching students healthy eating habits so early on. "If it's something you grow up with you're not going to question it later in life. As an adult, you get in an eating habit and it takes a lot to break it. If it's a normal everyday thing, you don't question it. It's routine. The kids are able to try new things and broaden their lives a bit."

Nurse Kathy Lupi, of Dover's Garrison Elementary School, added the students don't seem to mind the switch over to healthier foods, either.

"They're happy to do right things and be shown how to do it," she said. "They respond very well."

Lupi said years ago when she was at school, classroom parties would only have foods loaded with sugars.

"Now you walk in and it's fruit and vegetable platters, crackers and cheese," she said. "The kids are just as happy with that. They're not missing anything."

Elementary school is a good time to start healthy eating habits, Laska said, because parents tend to be more involved in their children's lives than in high school. While the school can provide education and nutritious meals, Laska said it is also what the students do outside of the school that can influence their health.

"It's really an American society issue," she said.

Covell said he has heard many arguments over whether it was the parent or the school cafeteria that has increased childhood obesity in the country.

"People need to stop trying to put the blame somewhere," he said. "Yes, people say the school lunch program made their child obese, but let's start at home. What are you eating? Are you going to McDonald's every night eating fast food? It's not just educating students. It's educating parents. That's what we strive for. It's a team effort that probably got them obese, and it's going to take a team effort to turn them around."

Covell said Dover has a website www.doverschoolfood.com, which provides information on healthy eating not just for students, but parents and teachers.

Tousignant said Maplewood elementary is trying to do outreach to students' homes. She said they are trying to educate families by sending out newsletters with tips on healthy habits and

have even spoken with the PTA.

While healthy eating habits help create a better lifestyle, schools also say they realize nutritional meals alone will not solve the problem.

"So many people realize that if you're overweight, it's from lack of activity, not just the food," Laska said.

She said Portsmouth schools are trying to encourage more physical activities outside of gym by having basketball, jump rope club or even just a walk around the building after school.

In Dover, Lupi said in better weather gym teachers offer a boot camp after school one or two days a week to promote exercise. The gym teachers also try to start off Monday mornings with a few laps around the track for students, she said. The school even had a walk to school day, which Lupi said had a "huge turnout, and it was pouring."

At Maplewood, Tousignant said students have gym twice a week and teachers encourage the students to do activities aside from playing video games or watching television. In December, the school did a Story Walk, which around 40 to 50 people attended, and along the walk, students were read sections of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas."

Laska said in Portsmouth, while they encourage physical activity at all levels, they are mostly focusing on physical activity in high school by working with kids who are not athletic and trying to get them involved in more physical activities.

She said this is because the physical aspect becomes more of a concern as kids get older and students are taught healthy eating habits at a younger age as a way to encourage a routine.

"That's when you can make the most difference," she said. "They can develop good habits early that will stay with them."

Covell said as students reach high school levels, it becomes more about giving them choices. That is why Dover gives students an option between a regular meal and a salad meal for students looking for a nutritious alternative.

He added that through work with University of New Hampshire interns, the high school vocation center has a greenhouse in which students grow vegetables that supply a salad bar in the cafeteria every Tuesday.

"Overall, it's about maintaining their bodies at the peak level they can," he said.

"I hope it raises awareness of healthy habits," Tousignant said about the programs. "I hope that if we do a good job, they can carry it right on to their own children."
