

ISSUE REPORT

# Investing In America's Health:

A STATE-BY-STATE LOOK AT PUBLIC HEALTH  
FUNDING AND KEY HEALTH FACTS



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PREVENTING EPIDEMICS.  
PROTECTING PEOPLE.

## PREVENTION IN ACTION

# Shifting the Wellness Culture: Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice

By Kay Owen, HEALTHY Armstrong Project Director

In 2005, Pennsylvania began to require that schools measure Body Mass Index (BMI) of students and send letters to parents of overweight or obese children. At the same time, a local pediatrician noticed that a significant portion of his pediatric patients had conditions that used to be adult problems (high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, sleep apnea and obesity).

He began to talk with the local hospital about this and they brought in other members of the community, including the local school district. Later, the county government and a commercial insurer got involved. As time went on, others were added to the group such as the YMCA, 4-H, local recreational groups, businesses and parents.

In the past, when we looked at the older BMI data, we realized a large portion of children entering kindergarten were within the normal weight range, but, as they went through elementary school, their BMIs went up before plateauing in high school. More recently, we noticed that kids entering kindergarten were now overweight and obese, so we shifted to focus on birth to school age and added more of a family/community focus.

### **Making the Healthy Choice the Easier Choice**

In schools, we removed all vending machines that contained junk food and sugary beverages from student areas and replaced them with healthy machines. In addition, we no longer have deep fryers in our schools and sell nothing fried. While we do serve a form of fries, they are baked and are served less frequently. Instead, we provide fruits and vegetables at every single meal and we also use only whole grain products and serve 1% and skim milk.

In the first few years, the school district increased the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables purchased by more than \$50,000 per year. In 2003, the school district purchased \$61,930 worth of fresh fruits and vegetables. In 2006, that figure more than doubled to \$136,197.

In addition to changing the food that's available, we had to shift the culture. At each school

building, there is a wellness facilitator who plans and implements in-school and after school activities that are either physical or include lessons about nutrition. Also, every secondary school has a morning walking program — so when kids arrive, instead of standing around, they have walking clubs and each elementary school has morning exercises that are announced over the loudspeaker.

We've received positive feedback from many members of the community. One mother wrote to us detailing her experience with her daughter. She said, my child was considered fat, but once we acknowledged the issue, we took steps to address the problem. The whole family participated in helping her lose weight and we all look better and feel better. At first it was hard to break bad habits, but we drew upon community services and are much happier.

The work we've done with schools and families has spread throughout the community. In the summer, the hike and bike event draws tons of interest. In addition, our Healthy Lifestyle Extravaganza, which is held at the local vocational education school, includes exercise stations. At the event, kids rotate from station to station and obtain tickets and the tickets are turned in for door prizes. There is also a healthy cooking demonstration by the culinary students: where students learn how to make healthy snacks and then get to eat them!

We have dramatically shifted the culture in our schools and community. In October of 2006, kids in the Armstrong School District participated in 402,142 minutes of physical activity. Two years later, students participated in 796,260 minutes of physical activity.

By focusing on the entire community, we can help children and families strive to be healthier. Our story shows that if you provide the resources and tools, families know what to do with them. We all want to be healthy and happy, sometimes we just need a little help.