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**SPANO KICKS OFF NEW PROGRAM TO FIGHT CHILDHOOD OBESITY
“Fit Kids” is part of larger campaign to encourage fitness and healthy eating among all age groups**

What do you get when you take a 12-year-old and add a toaster pastry, a bag of cheese puffs, a candy bar, a fast food burger and fries then top it off with three hours of after-school television?: One lethargic, overweight kid.

“This may sound a bit extreme, but its not that far-fetched an example of the kinds of foods young people are eating each and every day,” said County Executive Andy Spano. “More than 15 percent of children are overweight – that’s double what it was in 1980. Not only is this unhealthy, but it can result in more serious health problems at younger ages as well as when they become adults.”

To try to reach kids before they turn into couch-potato adults with high-cholesterol and diabetes, Spano today launched his new “Fit Kids” campaign.

As part of the campaign, Westchester County’s Health Department and Communications Office have developed a step-by-step guide to help schools develop programs and plan activities in their schools that encourage kids to eat healthier and exercise more. The guide will be distributed to the county’s 47 school districts in the hopes that they will develop programs that are appropriate for their communities.

The guide instructs schools on how to improve the quality of foods offered in their cafeterias and how to start a Healthy Heart Committee made up of school staff, parents or any interested adult as well as plan activities that will raise awareness among young people. Schools can hold “No Junk Food Days,” in which vending machines are turned off or filled with healthy snacks. Another popular event is a “10,000-Step A Day” challenge, in which kids are given pedometers to chart how many miles they can walk.

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Spano said that he will be expanding the Fit Kids program. On June 1, Westchester County Parks Department in cooperation with the Westchester County Health Department will sponsor a Fitness Fair at Kensico Dam Plaza that will offer a smorgasbord of physical activity from martial arts to yoga to dance in the hopes that it will influence adults and kids to exercise on a regular basis.

“Poor eating habits are established during childhood” noted Westchester County Health Commissioner Josh Lipsman. “Along with physical inactivity, poor diet accounts for at least 300,000 deaths among US adults each year, second only to tobacco use which causes 400,000 preventable deaths. Overweight and obesity are now recognized to be at epidemic proportions.”

He further noted that public health activities now need to focus attention on overweight, obesity and physical inactivity among our children. Fit Kids will enable the health department to work cooperatively with our schools and park system to address this public health issue.

On Wednesday, Spano kicked off the Fit Kids campaign with a taste test at White Plains’ Middle Schools’ Highlands Campus.

Students were asked to taste and choose between three healthy snacks: a yogurt parfait, baked chips and salsa or hummus and vegetables. The winning snack will be featured in future Fit Kids promotional materials as well as on the county’s website. Kids in schools throughout Westchester also are being encouraged to submit their ideas for the campaign.

The County Executive selected the school because it has already made significant strides in promoting fitness and nutrition among its students and staff.

White Plains Middle School has had a Healthy Heart Committee since last spring. Committee chair school nurse Joan Spivak says that it has made a big difference in the way students and staff approach eating and activity. She said one teacher who became involved lost more than 50 pounds.

“For me it’s been an interesting experience watching the kids enjoy and participate in the process,” said Spivak. “My hope is that they will remember what they have learned and live with it.”

During the week of December 9-13, the school held a “10,000 Steps a Day” challenge in which more than 700 students were given pedometers and competed to see who could walk the most miles. The cafeteria also offered a healthy entrée to as part of its cafeteria lunch each day.

Schools interested in participating in the Fit Kids campaign or learning more about the Fit Kids’ contest can call the Health Department’s Bureau of Nutrition at 813-5231.