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**1 IN 3 WESTCHESTER CHILDREN IS OVERWEIGHT OR AT RISK OF OVERWEIGHT
New Health Department report shows overweight statistics higher than national average**

According to a newly released report by the Westchester County Department of Health, 34 percent of kindergarten, second grade and fourth grade children in surveyed Westchester schools are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, compared with a national average of 32.2 percent.

“The prevalence of overweight among children has dramatically increased over the past few decades,” said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “It is troubling to see a higher prevalence in Westchester than in the country as a whole. Childhood obesity is highly correlated to obesity in adulthood, as well as to health conditions such as diabetes and hypertension.”

The study confirms what Westchester County Executive Andy Spano has been saying since 2003 when the county began its Fit Kids program to fight childhood obesity. A year later, concerned about the growing number of overweight adults and children, Spano initiated the Be Fit Westchester program to encourage people of all ages to eat smarter and become more physically active. In his State of the County Address in March, Spano announced that the health department had commissioned this study to determine the extent of the problem in Westchester.

“The findings of this study are not a surprise to me,” said Spano. “We have been saying all along that this is a growing problem, but before this study local statistics on childhood obesity did not exist. “While we knew that Westchester was not immune to this national epidemic, we now have hard data that confirms this and will help us as we move forward in initiating new programs to fight obesity.”

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The newly released Health Department report presents data recently acquired by the *Fit Kids Body Mass Index Screening Project*. The *BMI Screening Project* is a collaboration between the Health Department and 41 elementary schools in Westchester that routinely measure students' height and weight in kindergarten, second grade, and fourth grade and participated in the project. The Health Department determined each child's body mass index (BMI) based on data already collected by each of the participating schools. BMI is used to determine whether a person is underweight, normal weight, overweight or at risk of overweight. BMI is the ratio between weight/height. For each age, there is a standard distribution of BMIs. Children are considered overweight when they have a BMI greater than 95% and are considered at risk of overweight when they have a BMI ranging from 85% to 95%.

According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, the number of children nationwide who were overweight or at risk of becoming overweight rose five percent in the five years from 1999 to 2004. But, until now, Westchester has had limited county-specific data available on the extent of childhood obesity in the County.

The *Fit Kids Body Mass Index Screening Project* was initiated by the Westchester County Department of Health to estimate the number of school-aged children in the County who are overweight, or at risk of becoming so, and to determine whether there are differences by school grade and gender.

During September 2006 through May 2007, the Health Department analyzed data for 8,600 elementary school children in 19 of the 40 Westchester County school districts. Among those children, 17.2 percent were found to be overweight and an additional 16.8 percent were considered to be at risk of becoming overweight. In total, about one in three Westchester children in kindergarten and second and fourth grades was found to be overweight or at risk of becoming so. Boys in the project were more likely than girls to be overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. Fourth graders in the project were also more likely than kindergarteners to be overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

Of the 41 schools participating in the study, 13 schools had a rate of overweight or at-risk-of-overweight significantly higher than the national average. The students at these schools comprised 32.8 percent of students surveyed. Ten of the schools, representing 25.4 percent of students surveyed, had a rate significantly below the national average. The prevalence rate in the remaining 18 schools was similar to the national average. Since participation in the project was voluntary, results are not necessarily based on a representative sample and cannot be generalized to all Westchester County schools.

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In addition to the countywide report, participating school districts are given customized reports on prevalence of overweight for their own schools. Schools that did not participate in this project but are interested in joining should call the Health Department at (914) 813-5000. The Health Department is not releasing school-specific information to the public to protect the children’s privacy.

“We see this report as a call-to-action and hope that more Westchester County schools will become involved in the County’s Fit Kids to promote increased physical activity among students,” said Dr. Lipsman. “We encourage school officials to visit our Fit Kids website at www.westchestergov.com/health/FitKids.htm to learn about some of the great activities that many schools have already initiated in partnership with Fit Kids.”

Be Fit Westchester was established in 2004 to reinforce the message of Fit Kids with adults. Through this initiative, residents are encouraged to become more active through a Mall Walk program at The Westchester and through the local travels of the Be Fit Mobile. The county has also reached out to Westchester restaurateurs to eliminate the use of cooking oils that contain trans fats in their establishments. To date, over 400 restaurants have signed on as “Be Fit Restaurants” by pledging to use healthier cooking oils.

In addition, 18 Westchester municipalities have been recruited for the county’s newest Be Fit initiative, the *Mayor’s and Supervisor’s Community Health Challenge*. Municipalities participating in the challenge have agreed to create and implement activities and programs within their communities this spring that encourage residents to get fit and stay fit. From sponsoring organized walks and developing recreational grounds to launching bicycle programs and compiling healthy cookbooks, the participating municipalities are all doing their part to support the county’s anti-obesity efforts.

For more information, please call the Westchester County Department of Health at (914) 813-5000 or visit the Health Department website at www.westchestergov.com/health.