

Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Westchester County Health Commissioner

Safe Routes to School Conference

October 16, 2009, 8:30 a.m.

Westchester County Center

I'm pleased to be here today to acknowledge the good things that the Safe Routes to School program does for public health. Through the dedicated efforts of parents, schools, community leaders, County Executive Andy Spano and various government entities, this worthy initiative has been implemented in several Westchester school districts, and provides many positive health benefits for Westchester's children and the environment too. It is my hope that more schools in Westchester will see the value of this program and launch their own Safe Routes to School initiatives as well.

Rather than riding the bus or being driven by their parents, kids who are able to safely walk or bike to school are being given an additional opportunity to be physically active. This is certainly a welcome step in the right direction toward curtailing the epidemic of childhood obesity that is spreading in this country at alarming rates.

Childhood overweight and obesity rates have more than tripled in the United States during the past 30 years. Poor eating habits and an increase in sedentary activities contribute to this trend. Obesity in children and adolescents is a grave concern to those of us who work in the field of public health because it is linked with many health and social consequences that often continue into adulthood.

As the pervasiveness of childhood obesity keeps growing, so do the occurrences of diseases like type 2 diabetes and hypertension. These conditions were once considered adult ailments and in the past were diagnosed only rarely in adolescents. This is no longer the case. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control has warned that if the childhood obesity epidemic continues, one in three children born in the United States in the year 2000 will develop type 2 diabetes. For African-American and Hispanic children, this risk increases to one in two.

Being overweight during childhood and particularly adolescence is also related to increased morbidity and mortality in later life. If left unchecked, childhood obesity could shorten life spans in the United States by as much as two to five years. Sadly, this could be the first generation in modern history that has a shorter lifespan than their parents. This is a sobering prospect and public health professionals are working hard to prevent this from happening.

Nationally, the average of kindergarten, second grade and fourth grade students that are overweight or at risk for becoming overweight is 32.2%. To see how we compared, the Health Department conducted a Body Mass Index Screening project which was completed in 2007. The study analyzed data for 8,600 elementary school children in 19 of the 40 Westchester County school districts that routinely measure students' height and weight in kindergarten, second grade, and fourth grade. Prior to this study, local statistics on childhood obesity did not exist.

We discovered that 34 percent of kindergarten, second grade and fourth grade children in the surveyed Westchester schools were overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. When compared with the national average of 32.2 percent, Westchester has a statistically significant higher prevalence of childhood obesity and overweight than the nation as a whole. This is very troubling.

While the results of our study were not favorable, it is never too late to make changes and improve the odds of these children. At County Executive Spano's urging, Westchester County, with the support of community advocates like those who have rallied behind Safe Routes to School, is continuing to move forward and advance initiatives to fight childhood obesity.

"Fit Kids", the County's child health wellness initiative, encourages schools to create environments that support healthy eating habits and regular physical activity. Since its

inception in 2003, the Fit Kids Program has reached over 67,000 children in 112 schools in Westchester County.

As part of the Fit Kids Program, the Health Department and County Executive Spano's Office developed a step-by-step guide to help schools implement programs and plan activities that encourage kids to eat healthier and exercise more. The guide has been widely distributed to school administrators, teachers, and nurses and instructs them on how to improve the quality of foods offered in their cafeterias and how to plan awareness activities for students.

A comprehensive Fit Kids web page on the Health Department's website is also available and offers a myriad of resources for educators, parents, and kids. Several "Fit Kids" schools have shared their success stories on the "Fit Kids" web page, demonstrating that creating healthy school environments is not only doable, but it is also fun.

Through the Fit Kids Program, two successful countywide campaigns have been launched that promote health and wellness messages. These include the No Junk Food Week campaign, promoted in March each year in celebration of National Nutrition Month, and TV Turnoff Week, celebrated in April, which encourages children and their families to turn off their TV and explore other activities including fun events held at our County Parks.

In addition to providing kids with some extra exercise, let's also not forget that more kids walking and biking to school means less vehicles on the road emitting fumes that are harmful to the environment and personal health.

Air pollutants are bad for everyone, but they can be especially harmful to children because their respiratory systems are still developing. Air pollution has negative effects on lung development in children and can reduce lung function, increase respiratory infection, and aggravate asthma symptoms

Asthma is one of the most prevalent chronic illnesses of childhood. Nationwide, approximately 34 million Americans have been diagnosed with asthma by a health professional during their lifetime, nine million of which have been children under the age of 18. Sadly, it is estimated that the number of people with asthma will grow by more than 100 million by 2025.

In asthmatics, environmental factors such as animal proteins, pollens, fungi spores, and dust mites can bring on the inflammation of the airways that characterizes an asthma attack. For this reason, the environmental irritants are referred to as "triggers". One significant outdoor asthma trigger is ground-level ozone.

Ozone is a gas produced by the action of sunlight upon hydrocarbons in the atmosphere. In urban areas, those hydrocarbons are produced mainly by emissions from automobiles, power stations, and industrial plants. Ozone in the atmosphere helps to shield us from the sun's UV rays but ozone at ground level is harmful because we breathe it. It can exacerbate asthma or worsen its effect and can bring on shortness of breath even in people without asthma.

Here in Westchester, with the nation's most populous city as our neighbor, we have a huge commuter population adding to daily automobile emissions. Pollution from coal-fired power stations also drifts over us from power stations in our neighboring counties and from as far away as the Midwest.

While we don't have direct control over all of the sources responsible for polluting our air, walking and biking to school provide opportunities for children and families to reduce their personal carbon usage and contribute to the health of the environment.

If half of the students at an average size elementary school choose to walk to school their impact could be a savings of over 39 tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year. This is the equivalent of the carbon-removing abilities of 1,000 trees. Leaving the car at

home just two days a week will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 1,600 pounds per year. As you can see, these small efforts can yield big results.

In addition to the public health benefits that it affords, it is also worth noting that walking and biking to school has also been associated with improved academic performance, a greater sense of independence and greater self-esteem among children.

Everyone wants what's best for their children, and there is no greater gift that can be given to them than that of good health and a clean environment. Advocates of the Safe Routes to School program know that by creating walkable communities, they are fostering both.

As Westchester's Commissioner of Health, I am very fortunate to serve the people of Westchester under the leadership of County Executive Spano, who clearly sees the relationship between transportation and public health. I am also very pleased to work with Transportation Commissioner, Larry Salley, to be able to promote progressive programs such as Safe Routes to School, which improve the environment and enhance public health.