

Obesity in Children

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Obese children are costing U.S. schools millions of dollars every year in lost funding and may be lowering test scores as well, a report released by a former U.S. surgeon general said on Thursday. It urges schools, along with parents, to get kids moving and improve their nutrition.

"Schools have the unique opportunity, even the responsibility, to teach and model healthful eating and physical activity, both in theory and in practice," said Dr. David Satcher, a former U.S. surgeon general who helped found a nonprofit group called Action for Healthy Kids.

"Improving children's health likely improves school performance, and it may even help a school's bottom line. Therefore, schools have a vested interest in improving the nutrition and increasing the physical activity of their students," added Satcher, who served as surgeon general from 1998 to 2002. The group reviewed several studies to find evidence linking fat, malnourished children with poor grades.

They found, for example, that:

- Schools with high percentages of students who did not regularly exercise or eat well had smaller gains in test scores than did other schools.
- Children who do not get the recommended basic vitamins and minerals have lower test scores, are absent more, have difficulty concentrating and have less energy.
- Physical activity programs are linked to increased concentration and improved math, reading, and writing test scores.
- Students taking daily physical education classes missed fewer classes, had a more positive attitude to school and earned better grades.

"The majority of American youth are sedentary and do not eat well," the report says.

"These unhealthful practices can lead to learning problems in school and health-related problems that may begin during school-age years and continue into adulthood."

The percentage of U.S. children who are overweight has tripled since 1980 to 16 percent, or 9 million, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (news - web sites). Not only do they risk early heart disease, diabetes and cancer, but their learning can be affected, too, the report says. "One study found that severely overweight students miss, on average, one day per month or nine days per year, and that absenteeism rates among these students are six times higher than for their non-overweight peers," the report reads.

Attendance, State Funding

The report made an estimate of the potential impact of poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and weight problems on attendance, and thus on school funding. Some states use attendance to help determine state funding for schools, and a single-day absence by one student costs anywhere between \$9 and \$20. "Using an estimate of the rate of absenteeism among overweight students, combined with an average prevalence of overweight students, this may lead to a potential loss of state aid of \$95,000 per year in an average-sized school district in Texas, and \$160,000 per year in an average-sized California school district," the report reads.

"The loss in large cities is likely to be much higher; for example, New York City could lose about \$28 million each year, while Chicago could forfeit an estimated \$9 million and Los Angeles an estimated \$15 million." Other costs include extra staff time to help troubled students as well as time needed to give drugs to children with chronic weight- and nutrition-related illnesses.

"Schools cannot afford to act as if student health is somebody else's problem," said the Action for Healthy Kids' Gene Carter.

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