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Zone Health program focuses on childhood obesity

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During the past two decades, the percentage of overweight children doubled in the U.S.

In North Carolina, more than one in four teens are overweight.

There are a number of programs aimed at reversing this alarming trend.

One program focuses on a place where 95-percent of the kids in our state spend time each week, the public schools.

As a middle school physical education teacher, Jonathan Dent feels the pressure to get his kids in shape now more than ever. He said, "It is an epidemic at this point.

The epidemic not only puts children at a much higher risk of becoming obese adults, but a recent study shows that physical inactivity, excess weight and Type II diabetes in children cost North Carolina about \$38 million a year.

"We have seen chronic diseases being diagnosed in children that normally are not seen until late in adult hood," Meg Van Staveren of N.C. Prevention Partners explained. "High blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes are all on the rise in children."

N.C. Prevention Partners is a group dedicated to improving the health of North Carolinians and is taking aim at public schools.

The non-profit is conducting a three-year pilot program called Zone Health. The program provides assistance and resources to schools to help them develop a better nutrition and physical activity environment for students.

"Almost every school has implemented the Winner's Circle program in their cafeteria's, which bring in better nutritious foods," Van

Staveren said. "Some schools have created pedometer programs where the children have a pedometer and they're able to track their steps during the day, some schools have also addressed staff wellness."

In all, nine schools from three counties are participating.

The changes from the program are clear. The cafeteria at a school in Cumberland County offers nutritious choices in the lunch line, including a salad bar.

Physical education teachers are now incorporating what they call lifelong activities into gym class, like yoga.

Dent even has his kids fill out a nutrition log. "We calculate how many calories they had, a little formula for how many calories they need based on your body type and weight and how much physical activity you get during the day," he added.

Educators hope those lessons will translate into healthier lifestyles in schools and at home.

Zone Health is funded by a community partnership grant through GlaxoSmithKline.

When the pilot program comes to an end this year, N.C. Prevention Partners hopes to team-up with different companies across the state to get the program into every public school.

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