Six states get an 'A' for work against kids' obesity

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Story Highlights
• University of Baltimore researchers rate states' anti-obesity efforts
• Six states get grade of A for overall efforts to fight obesity
• Three states get A's for focus on childhood obesity

More on CNN TV: Elizabeth Cohen brings you more on school districts that send home reports on children's BMI. Watch "Paula Zahn Now," tonight 8 ET.

By Val Wadas-Willingham CNN

(CNN) -- America is a heavy nation and getting heavier, especially young people. The number of overweight children aged 6-11 more than doubled the past 20 years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health experts warn that unless we do something to stop it, those numbers will continue to rise.

Several states and cities are now taking steps to combat obesity, especially in young people. Each year, the University of Baltimore Obesity Initiative grades states on their efforts to pass obesity-reducing legislation.

This year, for the first time, six states -- California, Illinois, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Tennessee -- received A's for their legislative and public-policy work to control obesity in children. (Read the full report.)

Among the measures hailed were bills that:
• Set nutrition standards for schools and limited vending machine access in schools
• Require measuring and reporting of each student's Body Mass Index • Require recess time and physical education classes
• Add obesity-awareness and weight-reduction programs to school curricula
• Support obesity research
• Support insurance coverage of obesity Establish public obesity commissions

Only three states -- California, New York and Tennessee -- earned the same grade for their efforts to help all age groups. (Link here to overall obesity map TK Tuesday) Still, the number of states taking steps to control the problem is climbing quickly according to the report, helping to chip away at the $130 billion in direct medical costs caused by obesity each year. (Click to see how your state ranks.)

Doctors and researchers are concerned because obesity can cause major health problems, such as heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. Researchers found obese youngsters tend to have at least one additional risk factor for heart problems later in life, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

Kids who are overweight are also at greater risk for joint problems, poor self-esteem -- even sleep apnea. Taken together, these illnesses shorten life spans, diminish quality of life and put a heavy burden on the public health care system.

Kenneth Stanton, assistant professor of finance at the Merrick School of Business at the University of Baltimore and chair of the Obesity Initiative, thinks there are parallels between the battle against obesity and the battle against smoking. "The progress reminds me of about 1991 or '92, in that certain messages about obesity are coming together and gaining traction," Stanton said. "You can look at New York City's decision to ban trans fats as a significant victory, in that it made national news and there was little outcry about it."

Stanton says more states will start to include school-based nutrition standards, obesity programs and physical education classes to keep kids fit. And more school lunch rooms will replace sugary drinks with more healthful fare like juices, low-fat milk and bottled water, says Stanton.

Seven states -- Arkansas, California, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and West Virginia -- require BMI or Body Mass Index report cards, informing parents of a child's risk of becoming obese.

In 2003, Arkansas was the first state to enact BMI report cards. In three years, although the number of obese children has not dropped in that state, it has leveled off, which researchers see as a positive sign. Zoltan Acs, co-founder of the Obesity Initiative, says it's up to the states to get the job done. "We're seeing more of these laws coming out of the states, and some of them are quite effective. A federal solution would be much more difficult," Acs said.

"Every state has a different mix of populations, a different outlook on diet and nutrition, and so a one-size-fits-all approach simply would not be feasible."

But not everyone thinks the BMI report card is a great idea. Parents have
complained the notices are stigmatizing and damaging to a child's self-esteem. ([Watch one mom's opposition.])

When 8-year-old Jasmine Tallman of Hyannis, Massachusetts, came home with a letter saying she was on the verge of becoming obese, her mother, Vicki Elliott, was not pleased. Not only did she say Jasmine was an active, healthy child who weighed only 66 pounds and had just seen her pediatrician, but she felt it was none of the school's business to meddle in her child's weight issues. Elliott was also concerned Jasmine would become obsessed with her weight and possibly develop an eating disorder, because the BMI backs up society's attitude that thin is in.

"You go to the newsstand -- skinny women on the front of all the covers," says Elliott. "I want her to be healthy because it's the way to be, not because it means being skinny."

On Monday, the Arkansas House of Representatives voted to repeal the BMI-tracking law, citing parental complaints at state intervention and funding issues. The measure now goes to the state Senate.