



Mass in Motion Communities Show Significant Decreases in Childhood Obesity Rates

Early Analysis Shows Promising Trend

Overweight and obesity rates are at historically higher levels; and the percentage of the populations with diabetes has doubled in past 15 years. It isn't just adults who are overweight – 1 in 3 school children are overweight or obese as well. Fortunately, there is a Massachusetts-based program – the Mass in Motion initiative – that appears to be successful in combating this.

Mass in Motion was launched in 2009 by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) and its partners. It is a multi-faceted effort that focuses on promoting conditions in residents' communities, workplaces and schools that make the healthy choice the easy choice. Among its components are grants to cities and towns to support local innovation, model state food purchasing guidelines, workplace wellness programs and educational toolkits and materials.

And because of the importance of children's health, MDPH has prioritized school-based efforts

such as improving foods and increasing physical activities in schools. To insure that parents have accurate information about their children's health, all public schools now collect Body Mass Index (BMI) measurements for students in grades 1, 4, 7 and 10 and confidentially relay these to parents. This effort has been led by school nurses across the state. In addition to assisting parents, the aggregate data on BMI results is also useful for tracking the rates over time and planning school and community based changes to promote healthy weight among children.

Five communities – Fitchburg, Gloucester, Northborough,

Springfield and Weymouth – were chosen for early analysis of BMI rates. These cities and towns not only collect BMI in public schools, but also have been participating in the Mass in Motion initiative since its inception.

The analysis showed a significant drop in the BMI in public schools in this group of Mass in Motion communities. They showed a decrease in overweight and obese BMI levels of 2.4% compared to other communities that showed only a 0.4% decrease. This means that as many as 1,137 more kids attending schools in these 5 Mass in Motion communities now have a healthy weight!

Although the initiative is still in the early stages, these results demonstrate a positive trend, and underscore the potential effectiveness of addressing the obesity problem using a multi-faceted approach that incorporates awareness about individual behavior changes, partnerships at the local and state level, regulatory action and environmental and systems changes.

HOW IS BMI CALCULATED?

BMI in children is calculated by collecting height and weight, and comparing it to other children of the same age and sex. The results are given as a percentile (%). A BMI greater than 85% is considered overweight or obese.

To look for improvements in school BMI that might be connected to Mass in Motion, certain criteria had to be met. Analysis was restricted to communities that had been involved with Mass in Motion for 3 years; had reported public school data for all four grades in 2009, 2010, and 2011; and whose data was considered reliable. This left the 5 communities that were chosen. For non-Mass in Motion communities, 47 districts met the criteria.

