

Margaret Lavin: Obesity becomes threat to national security

By Margaret Lavin
San Mateo County Times

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Weight problems have become the leading medical reason young adults are unable to serve in the military. This is according to research from Mission: Readiness, www.missionreadiness.org, an organization of more than 250 retired generals, admirals and other senior military leaders. They recently released, "Unfit to Fight: A Report on California."

"Many of us, when we think of the military, we think of large ships, fast jets and smart weapons," retired Brig. Gen. Keith H. Kerr said. "I can tell you that the real secret weapon in our arsenal is our people."

Unfortunately, an estimated 1 in 4 young adults in California are too overweight to join, and a general lack of physical fitness among children and young adults poses a real threat to national security.

San Mateo County, however, leads the state in fighting childhood obesity. Its residents have decreased obesity rates by 5.6 percent while other counties have increased.

"We're pleased that our efforts are helping to turn the tide on childhood obesity," said Sarat Mayer, San Mateo County Health System's director of Health Policy and Planning. "At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that 34 percent of our children are still overweight or obese. We must continue to focus on making big changes, such as working with urban planners, schools and transportation planners to consider the health effects of how they design and build

our communities."

According to California State Board of Education Policy 99-03, elementary grades 1-6 require a minimum of 200 minutes of exercise each 10 days, and secondary grades 7-12 require a minimum of

400 minutes each 10 days.

Bob Faulkner is the middle school PE teacher at Clifford Elementary School. He believes there is enough time allotted at his school, but more exercise needs to take place outside of school.

"Kids are not getting enough proper physical exercise after school and on the weekends," he said. "My suspicion is there are too few parents involved and kids spend too much time playing with various electronic devices."

At Taft Elementary School in Redwood City, students receive only 45 minutes of PE a week, and the PE instructors are volunteers from Peninsula Covenant Church. Melissa Vandermolen, a fifth-grade teacher at Taft, is grateful to the volunteers but knows that more needs to be done. "Forty-five minutes a week is really not a sufficient amount of structured exercise," she said.

Members of Mission: Readiness call on state and local policymakers to:

- See that the state-required PE minutes are met in more schools.
- Encourage schools to measure and act on whether their PE and recess time includes enough moderate-to-vigorous activity.
- Continue to strive for trained PE teachers, adequate class sizes and adequate facilities and equipment.
- Explore ways to highlight and reward schools for making positive changes. What can we do as parents? Check with administrators to see if the required PE minutes are being met and



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ask for a copy of the PE standards. If you have concerns, bring them up at the next school board meeting and recruit other parents to get involved. To find out more ways residents of San Mateo County are collaborating to develop strategies that will reduce and prevent obesity, go to www.gethealthysmc.org. Contact Margaret Lavin at elementarydays@gmail.com.



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County's obesity battle working

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San Mateo County is one of only a few California counties where obesity rates have significantly dropped over the last five years, according to a just-released study, and officials are thanking the work of a community-wide initiative.

"Seven years ago we made a commitment to turn the tide on obesity and it looks like we are making progress," said Health Officer Dr. Scott Morrow in a prepared statement. "A lot of the work the Health System and community are doing is about changing the physical environment to promote health. It is also about redesigning food systems to support health. This work will take a long time before we see it pay off, but this study suggests we're on the right track."

Since the launch of the Get Healthy San Mateo County initiative, the Health System has worked with community partners to increase the number of children walking and biking to school, improve streets and neighborhoods to make walking and biking the easy and safe option, remove junk foods from schools and corner stores and decrease sugar-sweetened beverage consumption.

The percentage of overweight and obese children in the county dropped 5.6 percent between 2005 and 2010, according to the study *A Patchwork of Progress: Changes in Overweight and Obesity Among California fifth, seventh and ninth graders, 2005-2010*. The report was prepared by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

San Mateo is the only Bay Area county to see a decrease over the past five years but health officials say the work is far from done. One out of every three children in the county, or 34 percent, is still deemed obese or overweight.

View the full study at www.publichealthadvocacy.org or www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu/patchwork.

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San Mateo County Leads State in Fighting Childhood Obesity

New study shows 31 out of 58 California counties have not been able to curb a 30-year-old epidemic.

By [Rebecca Rosen Lum](#) | [Email the author](#) | November 9, 2011

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In the battle to control childhood obesity, San Mateo County is pioneering a path out of a spotty, sometimes dismal statewide picture, a new study indicates.

A Patchwork of Progress: Changes in Overweight and Obesity Among California 5th, 7th and 9th Graders, 2005-2010, reveals much of the state still struggles to get a handle on the epidemic, which took off some 30 years ago. Out of 58 counties, 31 have failed to slow the trend, which has been linked to serious illnesses.

While obesity rates have decreased by 5.6 percent in San Mateo County, they have increased in other Bay Area counties. Marin County, which historically has had the lowest rates, saw a spike of 5.5 percent.

In 2004, California began implementing a series of laws banning sugary drinks and junk food from public school campuses.

The percentage of overweight children dropped overall by 1.1 percent from 2005 to 2010, although nearly 40 percent of children suffer from the disorder.

"California led the nation in establishing many of the most innovative programs and policies that are improving our children's chances for a healthier life," said Harold Goldstein, executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, which conducted the study with the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

"But in light of the huge number of counties where childhood obesity rates continue to climb, our efforts must continue and even expand, especially in those areas where we now know children are most at risk," he said.

California spends more public and private money on the health consequences of obesity than any other state – more than \$21 billion annually.

Imperial, Colusa, Del Norte and Monterey counties contend with the highest rates of obesity, and Del Norte and Colusa also saw the highest increases.



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"We hope this county-by-county analysis will help community leaders pinpoint and take action in counties in the greatest danger," said UCLA's Susan Babey, the lead author on the study.

A Successful Partnership

But counties that have not been able to reduce childhood obesity are not necessarily doing anything wrong, said San Mateo's public health chief Scott Morrow.

A problem that was 30 years in the making and incorporates business, agricultural, cultural and nutritional factors will take as long to remedy, he said.

"The reasons for obesity are so complex," he said. "There is so much pressure, from pushing sedentary behavior to government subsidies for commodity crops. It's going to take a lot of pressure the opposite way to change this."

Partly to blame: A landscape of drive-through restaurants.

"We've made an environment that's obeso-genic, that didn't take into consideration the effect of all this fast food," he said. "And there is a real disconnection today between kids and agriculture."

The county health department has partnered with the schools to slow the trend in the 7-year-old Get Healthy San Mateo County initiative, a community-wide effort. The coordinated plan of attack includes improving nutrition both on-campus and off, promoting more physical activity and "making a very strong push for a garden-based education" in which students plan, tend and harvest crops.

"They learn math, science, social studies around that garden," he said.

The health department not only urges schools to ramp up athletics in an era of diminishing physical education, but also trains teachers how to incorporate physical activities into other kinds of lessons.

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State childhood obesity rate takes a U-turn, but progress patchy

By Suzanne Bohan
 Contra Costa Times
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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT (publ. 11/12/11)

Due to an editing error in story about a state survey finding fewer obese youths incorrectly included among the factors Michelle Obama's campaign to improve children's diets. Her program has not been in place long enough to have affected youth obesity rates.

In a heartening sign that California's kids are starting to cut back on sweets and get off their couches, a report released Wednesday shows a small decline in the number of overweight and obese children across the state in the past five years.

"It's small but meaningful," said Harold Goldstein, executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. "At least we know we can turn this epidemic around."

The 1.1 percent decline reverses a trend that showed a spike in unfit children over the previous five-year period, but closer to home children's weight continues to be a problem: Bay Area kids in all but San Mateo County tipped the scales more heavily than before.

First lady Michelle Obama's campaign to improve children's diets, campus soda bans, laws to keep junk food out of school cafeterias and new rules on physical education have all helped slim the state's overall obesity numbers.

The latest report follows one from Goldstein's group in 2005 that found a 6 percent rise from 2001 to 2004 in California children who were overweight or obese.

But the report, "A Patchwork of Progress,"

also shows the challenges in reversing the 40-year

rise in obesity among California's children. Since 1970, rates have tripled for 12- to 19-year-olds, and quadrupled for 6- to 11-year-olds, according to a 2007 study. More than a third of California children remain overweight or obese, a figure Goldstein called "intolerably high."

And although 27 of the state's 58 counties showed drops from 2005 to 2010 -- including the 5 percent decline in overweight children in San Mateo County -- the rate in 31 other counties rose by as much as 10 percent.

In the Bay Area, even with its multitude of anti-obesity programs, rates still increased in all counties except San Mateo.

In Contra Costa County, for example, the number of overweight and obese kids rose by 3.5 percent.

"My response when I looked at the rate is 'it's high everywhere,'" said Tracey Rattray, director of community wellness and prevention programs for Contra Costa Health Services. But some programs are showing signs of success, she said, such as weight loss counseling and physical activity vouchers that led to reduced body mass index in participating youths.

In Alameda County, the rate rose nearly 3 percent. Even in Marin County, with historically the lowest number of overweight or obese kids, the rate increased by 5.5 percent.

"I have to admit I was a little disappointed," Santa Clara County Supervisor Liz Kniss said of the 0.2



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percent rise there. "At the same time, I suppose I should be gratified we stayed at (essentially) status quo."

That's a key point, said Goldstein. "All the work that's gone on has kept the numbers from going up even higher," he said.

In Santa Clara County, the "Rethink Your Drink" campaign is one example of a local success, which Kniss said has persuaded many parents to reduce soda consumption among their children.

"Some of the things we have been doing over the past five or 10 years have been paying off," said Dr. Scott Morrow, a San Mateo County health officer. "I'm hoping it's not a statistical fluke."

Morrow said the county has worked with its roughly two dozen school districts to bring vegetables to students. One way of doing that is a school garden, where kids grow their own tomatoes and Brussels sprouts. Morrow said schools have also worked to put exercise back into the students' daily routines; many have seen physical education budget cuts.

Given the glimmer of success, Goldstein said, it's time to "double down" on ways to increase access to healthful foods and physical activities for children. The report's data came from an annual physical fitness test given to students in grades five, seven and nine.

Inactivity and the consumption of sweetened drinks account for much of the obesity crisis, Goldstein said.

The American Beverage Association did not respond to a request for comment on soda's role in the childhood obesity epidemic.

What's at stake is the physical and emotional health of many of California's youth. They have higher odds of developing diabetes, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders as children and into adulthood if they remain heavy.

They also contend with the stigma of excess weight.

"They can end up being the target of ridicule by their peers and just face self-esteem problems," said Susan Babey, a research scientist with the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, which published the report in partnership with Goldstein's

organization.

About \$21 billion from private and public sources in California is spent on the health consequences of obesity, including lost productivity, the report noted.

The slight shrinkage in young waistlines in some regions might vindicate laws the state began passing in 2004 to ban sugary drinks from public school campuses and increase healthful offerings in cafeterias, Goldstein said.

"It's more than coincidental that these (obesity and overweight) numbers peaked right when the school nutritional standards started going into effect," he said.

The report examined trends in overweight and obese children and did not explore why different counties had such varying rates.

Staff writer Joshua Melvin contributed to this report. Contact Suzanne Bohan at 510-262-2789. Follow her at [Twitter.com/suzbohan](https://twitter.com/suzbohan).



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