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**ARKANSAS RELEASES SCHOOL-BY-SCHOOL RESULTS OF  
BMI SCREENINGS  
Study Shows No Area Spared From Epidemic**

**LITTLE ROCK** – The Arkansas Center for Health Improvement (ACHI) released a report today providing a first-ever analysis of body mass index (BMI) data at the school, school district, county and state levels.

“No area of the state has been spared from the epidemic of childhood obesity,” said Dr. Joe Thompson, Director of ACHI. “This study clearly indicates that children of every age, gender, economic status and ethnic group across the state are vulnerable.”

At a news conference to release the study, Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee also outlined the next steps the state is taking in its legislatively mandated battle against childhood obesity. He said an additional six community health education specialists would be assigned to posts around the state to assist advisory committees that are being formed at individual schools to develop local solutions to the problem.

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“This study is significant because it supports what physicians and other health care professionals have been telling us about the rapid rise in childhood obesity across the country,” Thompson said. “It presents detailed information for individual schools and districts, as well as a comprehensive analysis that will be helpful not only to Arkansas, but to other states and communities across the nation.”

With BMI data on more than 345,000 students in grades K-12, Arkansas can accurately detail the trend in childhood obesity in an unprecedented way. ACHI used the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s BMI-for-age charts, which are both age- and gender-specific, to determine whether a child might be underweight, normal weight, at risk for overweight, or overweight.

Overall, 38 percent of Arkansas’ public school students are either overweight or at risk for overweight. Approximately one-third of the state’s children – 32 percent – enter kindergarten overweight or at risk for overweight. The obesity epidemic steadily increases until it peaks in the middle school years, with 42 percent of sixth-grade children in one of the two high-risk categories. A modest decrease in obesity in the high school years can be attributed in large part to females losing weight during those years. A slightly higher percentage of males – 39 percent – are considered overweight or at risk for overweight, compared with 37 percent of females assessed.

Hispanic males and African American females were in the highest obesity risk groups when data was evaluated by race and gender. Forty-nine percent of Hispanic males and 44 percent of African American females were identified in one of the two high-risk categories. There was virtually no difference between Caucasian and African American males.

In more than 40 percent of the school districts assessed, more than 40 percent of students were in the overweight or at risk for overweight categories. These school districts are located in every region of the state, including rural and urban areas, and include all ethnic groups.

“This report should sound an alarm to our state and nation about the epidemic facing our children,” said Gov. Huckabee. “Childhood obesity is a major health problem that jeopardizes the lives of our children by putting them at risk for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and other preventable diseases. But we can change the course of this epidemic when parents, schools and communities work together for healthier children.”

Act 1220, passed by the Arkansas General Assembly in 2003, offers a multi-faceted approach to reducing childhood obesity in Arkansas. One component mandated the formation of a School Nutrition and Physical Activity Advisory Committee in each school district to develop and implement local policies that encourage healthy programs and activities. The committees comprise members from school district governing boards, school administrators, food service personnel, teacher organizations, parents, students and professional groups, such as nurses and local businesses.

The Act also called for the annual BMI screening of every public school student to alert parents to possible health problems and to assess the prevalence of obesity among the state's children. In addition, it created a state Child Health Advisory Committee to coordinate statewide health efforts to combat childhood obesity. The Committee meets regularly and has submitted recommendations to the Arkansas Department of Education to improve health education and school environments.

“Our legislators developed a process in Act 1220 for informing parents, schools and communities about the epidemic sweeping our state. They recognized that childhood obesity is a crisis that can be controlled only by working together. I applaud the efforts that already have begun in our schools and look forward to seeing local initiatives put in place throughout the upcoming year,” said Thompson.

The 2003-2004 academic year was the first for the BMI initiative. Ninety-three percent of the state's 1,135 schools reported results by July 9, 2004. Individual data forms were submitted for 94 percent, or 421,973 of Arkansas' 449,485 public school students. Of those individual data forms received, 345,892 were considered valid for assessment.

A complete copy of the 2004 *Arkansas Assessment of Childhood and Adolescent Obesity* is posted online at [www.achi.net](http://www.achi.net).

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