

PRESS RELEASE

FSU Researcher Wins \$2.2 Million Grant to Study Childhood Obesity

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By Ron Hartung

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In response to a worrisome rise in childhood obesity, Florida school districts have begun to monitor student growth development every year, but there is little research available to determine if the effort is having an effect. Now, with a \$2.2 million grant from the National Institutes of Health and with the cooperation of Leon County Schools, a Florida State University College of Medicine researcher will explore the impact of school-based screening on student fitness and parent behavior. "NIH, the Institute of Medicine, and the Centers for Disease Control really want this question answered. There will be a lot of people interested in this," said Suzanne Johnson, department chair in medical humanities and social sciences at the College of Medicine, who was awarded the four-year grant. "It's a very big undertaking, involving the cooperation of 12 elementary schools and a massive amount of data collection." The stakes are huge. In the past 30 years, according to several studies, childhood obesity has doubled for preschoolers and adolescents and tripled for those ages 6 to 11. High obesity rates are particularly common in ethnic-minority children. An obese child often becomes an obese adult, and obesity opens the door to many health problems. Among them is type 2 diabetes, previously considered a disease of older overweight adults but now increasingly prevalent among children. At current U.S. rates, a 2003 study indicates, 33 percent of boys and 39 percent of girls born in 2000 are expected to develop it in their lifetime. "Type 2 diabetes is totally preventable," Johnson said. "It's just terrible to have kids with type 2 diabetes. It's simply unacceptable." She and her research team will monitor children at 12 Leon County elementary schools that have a high percentage of ethnic-minority students. The primary aim is to study the impact of BMI (body mass index) screenings. BMI, calculated from weight and height measurements, is a reliable indicator of whether children are overweight. Each school offers three wellness programs: a free after-school exercise program for children sponsored by Capital Health Plan; expanded health assessments sponsored by the FSU College of Medicine using funds generated by Dance Marathon on the FSU campus; and a wellness Web site that promotes healthy eating and activity. Researchers will track the children to document how much their health changes and how much their parents take advantage of the wellness programs. Because the study continues over several years, researchers also will get to assess what happens when the children aren't in school. "Data suggest overweight children often show

improvement in fitness during the school year if they participate in physical education or other types of physical activity programs. However, they often gain the weight back in the summer,” Johnson said. “We’ll be able to track whether this phenomenon really happens.” Parents are a key part of this project. They play a crucial role in the diet and health habits their children develop. “If you’re overweight as a child, you’re more likely to be overweight as an adult,” Johnson said. “If you’re an overweight kindergartner and we can get your weight down, you’re far less likely to be obese as an adult.” Johnson recently was chosen to receive a Distinguished Research Professor Award from Florida State University. It honors outstanding research among full professors who have attained national and international visibility. She previously held that distinction at the University of Florida and is the first from the young FSU College of Medicine research program to be selected for the honor. “Dr. Johnson is an outstanding scholar in her field,” College of Medicine Dean John P. Fogarty wrote in his nomination letter, “and is one of the first behavioral scientists to apply behavioral and psychological science to serious medical problems in children.”