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Study: Teenage smoking down in North Carolina

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RALEIGH — Programs designed to reduce teenage smoking in North Carolina are having an effect, according to a new study by researchers at the medical school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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The News & Observer of Raleigh reports that the study showed the percentage of middle-school students who smoke dropped from 5.8 percent in 2005 to 4.5 percent in 2007. The number of high school students who smoke fell from 20.3 percent to 19 percent.

The results come from what is being called the first comprehensive independent evaluation of the state Health and Wellness Trust Fund's anti-smoking efforts.

Gov.-elect Beverly Perdue, chairwoman of the trust fund since its creation in 2001, called the results gratifying and a "tremendous sign of progress" for an initiative that has sometimes had to buck North Carolina's pro-tobacco forces.

The trust fund gets a quarter of the state's payments from the 1998 national settlement with tobacco companies, and has spent \$125 million trying to persuade people to quit smoking or not to start. Its budget for anti-smoking programs this year is \$17.1 million.

It's believed the trust fund's programs triggered most of the declines in smoking, said Dr. Adam Goldstein, director of Tobacco Prevention and Evaluation Program at UNC. Kurt Ribisl, an associate professor at the UNC School of Public Health who studies tobacco issues, said the trust fund's efforts were impressive given the political courage they have taken.

"This is one of the best tobacco-control programs in the Southeast and hands down the strongest among the six major tobacco-producing states," Ribisl said.

Even those who think states often don't do enough to fight smoking are impressed.

"I actually think it has run a good program," said Danny McGoldrick, vice president for research at the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a national organization in Washington, D.C. "It's underfunded and isn't investing as

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much as it should, but it's doing a good job with the limited funds it has."

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For now, the trust fund has three anti-smoking initiatives: a set of programs aimed mainly at teens; another set aimed at college students; and a free telephone counseling service called QuitlineNC to help those who want to quit or help someone else quit.

McGoldrick noted that the CDC recommends the state spend more than five times as much — \$107 million a year — and that his group ranks the state 33rd in spending to fight tobacco use. The state should spend more on projects to cut exposure to secondhand smoke and to hit smoking among adults harder, he said.

Also, McGoldrick said, the legislature needs to drop a state law that prevents local governments from enacting tougher smoking restrictions than the state's.

Among the researchers' recommendations: The state should do more to reach young adults who aren't in college. The trust fund plans to do more about adult smoking, with test programs set to launch in January that will target smoking among pregnant women and people with mental illness.



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