

NIK on obesity in schoolchildren

In Poland, the number of children suffering from obesity and overweight has been constantly increasing. As many as 18 percent of schoolchildren have this problem, which is associated with the progress of civilisation. Remedial measures taken by schools and the public administration prove ineffective, and many local governments are more interested in the incomes of small shops located in schools than in the quality of the food that they serve.

NIK has audited the activities of the public administration and schools with regard to overweight and obesity prevention in schoolchildren. The audit covered the years 2009-2011 (first quarter).

Only in two schools (out of 52 audited), there were no cases found of overweight or obese children. In other schools, the problem has been constantly increasing, despite preventive measures taken. In 87 percent of schools that have small shops and in 75 percent of those who have food vending machines, the food offered is of low quality that no dietician would recommend (such as crisps, sweet carbonated drinks, energy drinks). At the same time, as many as one-third of schools do not provide lunches for students at all. Interestingly enough, in four out of eight audited schools that have been awarded the title of a "Health-promoting school" there are shops that offer fast food. None of the audited local authorities used their right to pass a resolution that would forbid school shops to sell low quality products. Only 16 percent of the audited schools have shops with health food. It has been also observed that local self-governments frequently expect managers of schools to support their budgets with incomes from renting space to those who run small shops in schools. This, obviously, makes the authorities of schools less willing to influence the owners of shops.

Attempts taken by schools and local authorities in order to promote healthy lifestyle among schoolchildren are usually accidental, incoherent, short-term and hence ineffective. Local authorities usually just extend the sports base and organise sports and tourist events. Local authorities do not develop reports on nutrition needs of children that would be the basis for local measures in the area. Education programmes elaborated in the audited schools comprise issues related to health, however only one-third of them set tasks directly dedicated to combating overweight and obesity. NIK also observes that it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of those programmes, since they were not preceded by analyses of the scale of overweight and obesity in individual schools, and did not cover the actual needs of students. The audited schools do not include issues related to overweight and obesity combating in plans for professional development for teachers, and the majority of the teachers surveyed by NIK admit that they are not prepared to support children in preventing these problems.

It is estimated that every fourth child in Europe is overweight. Obesity is not only a serious health problem, but it also is a burden to the economy: in some EU member states it eats up about 6 percent of government spending for public health. That is why programmes aimed at combating obesity have become a priority for all countries of the European Community. In response to the recommendations of the EU in the area, the Polish Ministry of Health implements the programme for preventing obesity, for which PLN 5.9 million was allocated for the years 2007-2011, out of which only PLN 2.4 million was actually spent until 2010.