

Abby Halford

# Let's Do Lunch

*Responding to childhood obesity concerns, an Oklahoma middle school developed a health and fitness program that produced results and brought the community together*

**W**e all know the facts: Childhood obesity is a growing problem. According to some studies, an estimated 17 percent of children ages 2 to 19 are obese. Those children are sitting in our classrooms.

Their health affects how they do in school, academically and socially. At least one study has shown that overweight children were absent from school significantly more than normal-weight children. Obese children also may be at risk for social discrimination. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the stress of social stigmatization can cause low self-esteem which, in turn, can hurt academic and social functioning and persist into adulthood.

Schools are logical places to start combating the problem. Educators and school leaders have the skills and expertise as well as connections to their families and community. In the fifth- and sixth-grade center at Jenks West Intermediate School in Oklahoma's Jenks Public Schools, our site committee developed a schoolwide "healthy and fit" initiative. Called "Let's Do Lunch," it was developed to address childhood obesity in various ways.

The program started with our Safe and Drug-Free Schools Committee, made up of parents, students, teachers, the child nutrition manager, the physical education teacher,

the school counselor, and the site principal.

Using the same committee members to put the healthy and fit initiative into place worked for us. Each had similar missions that complemented one another and reduced the need for more meetings. It was important to involve all sectors of the school community in the decision-making. Teachers, students, parents, health care providers, and child nutrition workers all provided their perspective and expertise.

## **Walking to Hawaii**

Our committee identified school areas that needed improvement, using the CDC's school health inventory. This self-assessment and planning tool helps schools improve their health and safety policies. It is easy to use and confidential. It also may be used as a baseline for outcomes. This process helped our committee to determine school goals. In terms of safety, we were doing many things right, but in the area of health and nutrition, our school was lacking a foundation and direction to improve student health and fitness.

Based on the assessment, we set our goal: to increase nutrition and physical fitness awareness among students. One program that came out of this goal the first year was "Walk to Hawaii." Classes competed each week for recognition and students recorded their individual progress by using pedometers donated by the PTA. They added their miles each week for their class total. A map representing

the distance from Oklahoma to Hawaii was prominently displayed in the front entrance of the school, where all students and visitors could see it.

As we passed through various locations along the way, we celebrated. We had a fiesta in Santa Fe, a beach party when we got to the ocean in California, and a cruise ship party for the ocean-going part of the trip. Of course, we had a luau when we reached Hawaii. All of this brought together geography, social studies, multicultural education, and math skills—and it built personal, class, and school pride.

Another effort to increase physical fitness enlisted parents and volunteers from the local church to supervise intramural activities on Fridays during recess. Students played crab soccer, obstacle courses, tug of war, volleyball, kickball, basketball relays, and Frisbee. This weekly activity may have resulted in fewer discipline incidents on the playground on Fridays, as discipline referrals from recess decreased.

To promote health and nutrition awareness, we started "Wellness Wednesdays." This day was devoted to special guests who spoke to students during lunch about health and nutrition issues. College and professional athletes spoke, but the biggest hits were the high school athletes. Other speakers included police officers, local TV weather commentators, pageant queens, coaches, hospital health directors, and physicians.

Before beginning the initiative, we surveyed students on their sleep and eating habits and their physical activity. We found that students were not getting enough sleep or exercise and weren't drinking enough water. Efforts were made through speakers and guidance curriculum to address these issues with students.

The fifth-grade food science curriculum also addressed food choices with students. Fifth-graders lobbied for a submarine sandwich station to be offered in the cafeteria in addition to the other lunch options. The committee developed a snack policy to encourage parents to send healthy snacks for parties at school.

The following year, we used more input from students and faculty in planning another healthy and fit initiative. We decided to focus less on competition and more on working toward a common goal. Students voted on the next walk theme, which helped create student involvement and buy-in. They decided on "Walk the Great Wall of China," in honor of our district's Chinese culture program. The physical education program became more involved by using class time for logging miles in class. Class posters were posted in the gym and a big picture of the Great Wall of China was displayed in the school entrance.

### **Communication and integration**

We told our community about the initiative in several ways, including morning announcements, contests, and classroom and school newsletters. Positive recognition was use-

ful in promoting the initiative, as was the visible evidence in the classroom and hallways.

We didn't want the program to be considered an add-on, so we worked to integrate it into the curriculum. The food science education, physical education, health education, and classroom guidance programs collaborated to develop a curriculum that allowed them to complement one another and accomplish initiative goals. Committee members taught in these areas.

Other strategies included using non-instruction time, such as morning announcements, transition time (changing classes in the hallway), lunch, and recess as much as possible.

### **What we accomplished**

Did we meet our goals? The first year we had a goal of walking as a school to Hawaii, but we did not use any measures to collect data. That year, we did have key committee members complete a health and safety assessment, which helped us determine concrete goals for our second year.

The next year, the goal then became to increase awareness of health and fitness. We used a pre- and post-participation survey that we found free on the Internet to ask students nutrition and physical activity questions. We saw a significant change in student survey answers from before and after the initiative. One positive result was the increase in water intake by students. Exercise time decreased by students from the fall to the spring. This could be attributed to the fact that the district is a big football powerhouse and most students participate in this sport in the fall, and not in the spring.

The physical education program also logged data. It measured miles walked, pushups completed, and minutes of cardio and strength activity performed by the students. Some states require the site health professional to measure and calculate students' body mass index annually, but our state does not. Other indicators schools may want to use are attendance and discipline data in determining school goals. We collected this data, but did not use it to inform our decision-making.

Healthy behaviors can and should be learned at a young age. Using multiple methods in our approach reinforced healthy and fit education from the classroom to the playground. Using data to inform decision-making contributes to continuous evaluation and improvement of the school-wide initiative. Shared decision-making in the planning process can bring about a greater involvement of shareholders and a buy-in factor among the school community. Collaborative effort provides creative ways to approach the problem of childhood obesity while making the experience fun and meaningful. This project pulled the school community together to achieve a common goal. ■

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