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'Well' done

WNY school district tops in nation

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In some places, it might be surprising to find kids measuring the hallways of their school or drawing abstract visions of health in art class.

But in West New York, it's the norm. The West New York Wellness Initiative, a combination fitness and nutrition program, has received national recognition for the changes implemented by staff and students and was recently commended by former President Bill Clinton at a press conference in Harlem.



"It started out with a few individuals who wanted to make a change and the word has spread," said John Fraraccio, the supervisor of health and physical education for the district.

Each school runs their own program as well as participating in district-wide activities.

"We have support from the top and this huge grassroots movement from the bottom." – Sal Valenza

Brian Cooney, a physical education teacher at School 5, runs one of three morning fitness programs in the district, which take place for about an hour four days a week. He said that what began as a jogging club to get students get active in the morning has turned into a nutrition club teaching kids how to read labels and find their target heart rate.

In addition to traditional fitness, the physical education department is also keeping kids' attention with special activities, like a "Thriller" assembly held last October.

"Kids wore makeup and scrubby clothes," said Cooney. "Then we dimmed the lights and put the music on."

The jam session went so well that the kids were asked to open for the multicultural show at Memorial High School in April.

"We have to get them while they're young so that they actually look forward to [fitness]," said Cooney. "It sounds like an impossible task, but it's not."

Food for thought

As part of the initiative, all fryers have been taken out of the schools, the amount of vegetables and fruits offered has been increased, only whole grains are served, and low fat products prevail.

While cookies are still sold in the lunch room, it's a whole grain, reduced fat cookie.

Sal Valenza, the district food service director, said that instead of taking away choice, the key is to teach kids how to choose.

"We have to keep a balance on what we're doing," said Valenza. "Food that children won't eat has no nutritional value."

Food service often collaborates with the schools to create a well rounded approach to health, such as a breakfast and walking program. "If we bring in a new food item we try to work it into the classroom somehow," said Valenza.

To increase wellness awareness at home, the food service department has sent home recipes for parents involving fruits or vegetables discussed in school and held events for families to taste and survey healthy foods.

The district is also in search of a celebrity helper that can talk to parents about how to make foods that are healthy and ethnically appropriate.

"We have support from the top and this huge grassroots movement from the bottom," said Valenza. "And I think we get a lot done."

National forum

Gigi Hepperle, a physical education teacher at School 2, attended the Healthy Schools Forum in New York City last year on behalf of her district.

Hepperle said the event, which drew schools nationwide, was an idea exchange where teachers shared strategies on how to get kids, staff, and parents involved. "It is a great network," she said. "The best part was that everybody just shared, it was a really great feeling."

Hepperle said that physical education in schools has shifted from a win/lose mentality to teaching kids about lifetime sports like running and yoga.

At her school, intramural sports have been introduced and an indoor fitness trail was created with posters in the gym and hallways.

“We’re trying to encourage little physical activity breaks during the day,” said Hepperle. “Even two minutes a day can help”.

They have also implemented creative strategies for getting active, such as the Empire State Building Walk-up Challenge. Whoever reached 1,860 steps (the amount in the Empire State Building) first was the winner.

Sights set on gold

West New York School District is in its third year with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, an organization created by a partnership among the Clinton Foundation, the American Heart Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Three district schools have received the silver recognition award and four others received bronze recognition level.

Nationwide, no one has achieved gold status yet.

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