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School programs geared toward fighting childhood obesity

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DeKALB – Lisa Cumings wanted to do something to address childhood obesity, which is a nationwide problem she says hits close to home.

She decided to mobilize members of the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Academy, of which she is taking part, to start pilot programs at a local school that focus on educating children and families about living a healthier lifestyle.

Cumings, the community health liaison for Kishwaukee Community Hospital's Community Wellness Department, said the programs focus on increasing physical activity, making better food choices and reducing time in front of the TV.



J.L. Reed (front) and Joseph Bromfield, who are actors with FoodPlay Productions, perform Tuesday for students at Tyler Elementary School in DeKalb. FoodPlay Productions is an Emmy Award-winning nutrition media company that tours the nation's schools and uses the power of live theater and interactive resources to turn kids on to healthy eating and exercise habits. (Rob Winner – rwinner@daily-chronicle.com)

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One of the programs is CATCH – or Coordinated Approach to Child Health – which reaches out to kids to help reduce child obesity through four main avenues. Cumings said CATCH focuses on classroom lessons about being healthy, which she teaches. Kids also participate in a physical education curriculum, a food service program and a community- and family-based initiative. The program is geared toward students from kindergarten to fifth grade.

"WE CAN," or Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition, is a program that's similar to CATCH, but it's geared more toward educating parents and families on ways they can live healthier lifestyles. Cumings said they can track how well the programs are influencing students' eating habits by testing them before and after they're implemented.

Obesity, she said, contributes to long-term health problems such as heart disease and diabetes. Obesity among adolescents ages 12-19 has more than tripled in the last three decades, according to national statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She said 34.5 percent of adults in DeKalb County are obese compared to 26.8 percent of adults in Illinois.

"Being overweight comes with many, many ramifications," she said.

Beth Busching, manager of the Community Wellness Department for KCH, said the school programs are part of a five-year plan that members of the Community Wellness Department hope to sustain and spread to other schools.

"What's so neat about it is we're not doing it solo, but involving the whole community," she said.

The programs have been in place at Tyler Elementary School in DeKalb since December and go through May. Andria Mitchell, principal of Tyler Elementary School, is also a member of the chamber's Leadership Academy. She said she thought Tyler Elementary would be a great school to pilot the CATCH program.

"It's been phenomenal," she said. "I'm really excited about our program."

Mitchell said CATCH is a national program, and DeKalb School District 428 has had materials for the program for a while, but it had never been fully implemented at any of the schools. Since December, the school has been actively applying the program to the curriculum.

This week, an Emmy Award-winning theater troop called FoodPlay Productions is performing at all nine DeKalb-area elementary schools. They performed an interactive play with students at Tyler earlier this week, which reinforces the lessons students have been learning since December. The play's main character, a juggler who loves junk food and watching TV, learns how to change his eating habits to feel better and become a great juggler.

Mitchell also said the school is rolling out a fresh fruit and vegetable bar in April that will be available during lunch every day.

Even the school's Fun Fair, which was held in February, had a healthy twist. Northern Illinois University athletes made an appearance, and bicycles and other sports equipment were auctioned off during the fair, Mitchell said. Students who participate in a certain amount of physical activity per day also will be able to attend an upcoming dance.

"We want to make sure we're teaching them how to make great choices now so they can sustain them for years to come," Mitchell said.

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It is fantastic to see this great partnership between Kishwaukee Hospital, District #428/Tyler School and the DeKalb Chamber Leadership Academy being recognized in this article. We hope to see more of this in the future. Youth obesity is a major health concern for our nation and the DeKalb area. It is heartwarming to see these three organizations working together for the health of our community and in this case specifically our children. Well Done!

Report