

## School pushes student health

By MELISSA DOWNER, The Saratogian  
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BALLSTON SPA - Malta Avenue Intermediate School in Ballston Spa has taken the bull by the horns in order to fight childhood obesity. Ballston Spa School District has initiated several steps designed to teach students the significance of eating healthy and exercising - not only for the body, but for the mind.

On Tuesday, the national award-winning nutrition show "FoodPlay" brought its cast of colorful, multitalented characters to Malta Avenue Intermediate School to perform for the students the importance of good nutrition and being active.

"FoodPlay Productions, which is sponsored by Hannaford Supermarkets, is a nutrition and health media company based in Hatfield, Mass. The company produces national touring live theater shows, DVDs, books, and other resources that kids can identify with in order to improve their views on health," spokeswoman Barbara Storper said.

Throughout the presentation, performers Jordan Wishner, who played "Toby Fit" and Phillip Gerba, who played "Junkfood Johnny" taught the students how to read food labels while making them chant, "read it before you eat it!"

They also taught the children about the food pyramid, how many servings of each food group they should eat and how much exercise they should get a day.

"The more active you are, the more sweets you can have," said Wishner, as he explained that sometimes it's OK to eat "junk food," as long as it is burned off. FoodPlay was presented as one of the health and fitness goals that the Healthy School Team, developed by the Ballston Spa School Board and the Healthy Schools Leadership Institute (HSLI), chose for the students to partake in so they might learn better living habits.

In the fall of 2005, the Malta Avenue Intermediate School Health Index Committee completed a survey through the HSLI which questioned the school's strengths and weaknesses in promoting both physical and mental health for students, staff and teachers. The survey found that Malta Avenue has a strong physical education program, but needs improvement in areas that promote and teach health and fitness, reading teacher Tammy McCarthy said. As a result, the school approved a new health



Jordan Wishner assumes his alter-ego, Toby Fit, as he talks to Malta Avenue Intermediate School students about the food pyramid during Tuesday morning's presentation on health, fitness and nutrition. RICK GARGIULO/The Saratogian

and wellness policy for the district, which sets guidelines for minimum lengths of physical education classes and recess, and will change the food and snacks that are served in the schools to allow healthier choices for students, McCarthy said.

To help teach better fitness regimens, the school board purchased pedometers and heart rate equipment to be used in physical education classes to work in conjunction with a walking program that tracks how far students have walked on a map "across America."

Additionally, the school is promoting the "24/7" program, which engages students and parents to actively eat something healthy or partake in exercise at least seven times a day, keeping track for a month, McCarthy said. At the end of the month, the students can turn in their tracking chart for a reward.

"We want children to be aware of the choices they make, and to know to how important what they eat and how much they exercise actually are," McCarthy said.

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