



Charlie Callahan, 9, waits for his fellow classmate Geraldine Ortiz, 9, to tag his hand during their physical exercise at Hedrick Elementary School, which takes place in the new changes nutrition and physical activity programs for local schools. BRANDY RONEK PHOTOS

SPARKing fitness

Program aims for healthy lifestyles

BY JULIO MORALES | Staff Writer, Copy Editor

The Brawley and El Centro elementary school districts are in the process of implementing changes to their physical education and nutritional programs this year as part of an ongoing effort to combat childhood obesity in the Valley. While the changes are not specifically employed to help young students lose weight, the changes are part of a multi-faceted effort to promote healthier lifestyle choices at school and in the home.

The changes are part of the Our Choice program, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded study involving 1,200 elementary students in the Valley and taking place over a two-year period under the supervision of various Valley agencies and San Diego State University.

The Brawley Elementary School District will now have a structured physical education program that will also produce “structured expectations,” said Luis Panduro, BESD director of educational services.

“It was something that was overdue,” Panduro said, referring to the newly implemented SPARK PE program.

The fully-articulated SPARK PE program provides curriculum that fosters specific skills, Panduro said. Different grade level teachers have been or will be receiving training on how to implement the professionally-developed PE curriculum, he said.



Pamela Beltran’s fourth-grade class at Hedrick Elementary School does exercises to take part in the new program to make changes to the nutrition and physical activity programs in local schools in Imperial Valley.

The Our Choice study also provides funding for the purchase of additional playground equipment for PE activities.

“The limitation has always been (playground) equipment,” Panduro said.

California law mandates that teachers devote 100 minutes of elementary school instruction-

al time every week to physical education.

The SPARK program will ensure all students are participating in age-appropriate physical education activities, said Desert Garden Elementary School Principal Kathy Brandenburg.

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"You can't say (students) are getting physical education just because they're out to recess," Brandenburg said.

In recent days her staff has been taking an inventory of the PE equipment found at their El Centro campus and undergoing training for the SPARK PE program.

"It's always good for accountability," Brandenburg said.

While the SPARK PE program was something the El Centro Elementary School District had initiated about six

years ago, additional grant funding will allow it to reinforce that prior training, said Janice Lau, ECESD director of special education and student services. Funds will also go toward replacing lost or broken PE equipment, she said.

Both school districts also received funding to purchase cold-water dispensers, and have plans to make personal water bottles available to the both districts' respective students, school officials said.

Although the addition of water dispensers is not a significant change to existing nutritional programs, which BESD

and ECESD officials said were already well-regulated by the state and federal governments, it is seen as a way to promote more healthy lifestyle choices on campus, they said.

Along with promoting increased physical activity and water intake, the study will also focus on promoting fresh fruit and vegetables as well as proper sleeping habits.

Here in the Imperial County, 47 percent of fifth-, seventh- and ninth-grade children were overweight or obese in 2010, according to a 2011 study by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research

and California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

The \$6 million CDC-funded study seeks to build on existing strategies being employed in the county to promote healthy lifestyle choices, said project manager Jamie Moody, with the SDSU Research Foundation.

The idea is to leave something "sustainable" behind once the intervention component of the study wraps up, Moody said.

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