

Southwest Arkansas Elementary School Shows the Way to Reducing Obesity

Fouke Elementary School, with over 65% economically disadvantaged students, in Southwest Arkansas has been getting national attention for being able to reduce the obesity rates of its children by nine percent at a time when childhood obesity rates are increasing in most of the nation. And guess what? As weight has gone down, attendance and test scores have gone up. It turns out that healthier children with better self esteem also learn better. In 2012 Fouke Elementary scored above the region and state averages on the high stakes state exams in every grade level first through fifth grade for literacy, mathematics and science. In 2010 Fouke Elementary was named the Healthy Model School for a five state region (Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico and Oklahoma). In 2011 the National Center for Educational Achievement named Fouke Elementary as a High Performing School in Science. Also, in 2011 Fouke Elementary was recognized as the National Distinguished Title I School for Closing the Achievement Gaps. Finally, in 2012 Fouke Elementary was recognized as a National Model for a Professional Learning Community at Work School. At a time when diabetes and obesity are epidemic, the principal at Fouke Elementary School has borrowed a page from his earlier days as a physical education teacher. What's transpiring in this rural grade school in southwest Arkansas with an enrollment of 550 students is setting an example for every elementary school in Arkansas – across the nation, for that matter.

“Want to improve kids’ grades?” asks Fouke Elementary School Principal Ken Endris. “Get them moving and teach nutrition.” The school has a multifaceted approach to the problem. Children are encouraged to be physically active. It starts when the kids get off the bus in the morning. Instead of just standing around, they head to the gym after breakfast to work out with Endris, physical education teacher Philip McFerrin, instructional assistant Sissy Crabtree and special education teacher Lynette Oliver. They play ball games, do relays, tumble, hula hoop, participate in cooperative activities etc. These activities are also available for children who stay for the after school programs such as the Principal’s Running Club and free gymnastics. The school also has tapped into acquiring several grants to implement the S.P.A.R. K. (Sports, Play & Active Recreation for Kids) Physical Education Curriculum Program; Joint Use Agreements grants to allow the community to utilize the school district facilities after hours for recreation and fitness; the Fruit and Vegetable grant to give all 550 students, plus all staff members a healthy snack everyday; and a grant to allow the school wellness committee to focus on the eight components for maintaining the Coordinated School Health Program.

In 2008 the school received a SNAP-Ed (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Education) grant for a nutrition instructor to provide each of the 550 elementary students 40 minutes of nutrition instruction per week. The nutrition instructor, Melisa Plunk, plans with other teachers to integrate nutrition education into the other disciplines like science and math. The nutrition classes are very hands on where every student has the opportunity to learn about a wide variety of healthy food

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choices. Students not only learn the benefits of these healthy food choices, but they are given the opportunity to taste the healthy snacks with each lesson.

By having a nutrition teacher on campus, Fouke Elementary was able to create into its master schedule seven weekly professional learning communities for teachers and staff to collaborate with each other to improve student achievement. Endris said, "These professional learning communities, along with the Healthy School Model, have allowed all stakeholders (students, parents, staff and community patrons) to have a better understanding on how sustainability of a successful healthy program can continue to produce positive outcomes."

Nutrition teaching focuses on the importance of drinking more water instead of sugary soft drinks. There are no vending machines for soft drinks at the school now, except for water. "Water is so huge," Endris said. "If you want to look at one piece that is significant when it comes to reducing obesity, it is water. Just make that change from sugary drinks. Sugary drinks, in excess, are one of the biggest culprits in obesity." The children are also taught to eat less fried foods, practice moderation by paying attention to portion sizes, eat more fruits and vegetables, and fewer starches. And what the kids are learning they are carrying home as good eating habits. Parents surveyed are reporting they, too, are adopting healthier eating lifestyles.

Endris has been invited to present information about their program at state and regional educational meetings, and educational officials have visited Fouke Elementary to see what the school is doing to reduce the obesity rates. One prominent national educator, Alice Lockett, told an audience on August 11, 2010 in Charleston, South Carolina, "We need to clone Fouke Elementary in every school in America." On October 30, 2012 Endris will be the keynote speaker in Alaska at their State Health and Wellness Institute. The keynote topic is: Going Beyond the Norm: Creating Healthier Schools Makes Kids Smarter!! "We have turned a lot of heads across the nation," Endris said. "It is amazing. We have been able to change our whole culture. We have changed behavior in a way that will be long lasting. It is not any kind of magical program it is just a matter of deciding that if it is that important than we need to make it happen." "I keep observing all the comments in newspapers, magazines and on television that we have to do something about obesity and diabetes. Right here in Southwest Arkansas, we are doing it. We have shared what we have accomplished with many other schools. We have the model for a healthy school. Collectively, we can make a difference for a healthier nation."

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