

HEALTHY PITTSFIELD

Working to get kids more active

By Linda Avalle
Special to the Eagle

Everyone knows the dire statistics: Childhood obesity has reached epidemic levels. The Center for Disease Control reports that obesity rates in children have doubled over the last 30 years and tripled in adolescents.

In 2010, one-third of children and adolescents in the United States were overweight and obese. Massachusetts ranks 33rd for percentage of overweight and obese children compared to the rest of the country, and dead last with the lowest percentage of high school students who meet the recommendation for 60 minutes of daily physical activity.

Healthy lifestyle habits, including healthy eating and physical activity, can lower the risk of becoming obese and developing obesity-related diseases. Schools play a particularly critical role by establishing a safe and supportive environment with policies and practices that support

healthy behaviors. Schools also provide opportunities for students to learn about and practice healthy eating and physical activity behaviors.

Pittsfield CAN (Connecting Activity and Nutrition) is a Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP) grant initiative offered through the U.S. Department of Education from 2013-2016. It is the second PEP grant funded in Pittsfield, with the first being Balancing the Equation (2010-2013).

Pittsfield CAN is being implemented through Berkshire Health System's Operation Better Start, with community partners being the Pittsfield Public Schools, Pittsfield Community Television and the Pittsfield Family Y. Operation Better Start is a group of health care professionals who work with clients from birth to young adults and their families on nutritional issues, such as eating disorders, obesity, pre-diabetes/diabetes, food allergies, asthma and hypertension.

The Center for Disease Control shows evidence that students who are physically active tend to have better grades, school attendance, memory skills and classroom behaviors. Higher physical activity levels are also associated with improved concentration and academic achievement.

Pittsfield CAN, Healthy Pittsfield Partnership and the Pittsfield Public Schools share a goal to support the link between healthy eating, physical activity and improved academic achievement of children and adolescents.

Physical education classes create a direct link to student wellness. The National Association of Sports and Physical Education and the Center for Disease Control recommend contact time for physical education be 150 minutes per week for grades kindergarten to 5.

Currently, elementary students in the Pittsfield Public Schools attend physical education once a week for 45 minutes.

Classroom activity breaks

Pittsfield CAN is collaborating with the Pittsfield Public Schools to increase the time elementary students are physically active during the school day by adding to the time spent in physical education.

Pittsfield CAN is sponsoring SPARK Activity Break Choices (SPARKabc) training, curriculum and equipment to elementary classroom teachers and paraprofessionals in the Pittsfield Public Schools early in the 2015-16 school year.

SPARKabc provides physical activity opportunities in the classroom. The content includes Classroom ASAP's (Active Soon As Possible), as well as physical activities that support learning standards in Literacy/Language Arts, STEM, Social Studies, Nutrition Education, as listed in the Massachusetts Common Core State Standards.

SPARK trainers from all over the country will lead elementary classroom teachers through a professional development session that is designed to model how teachers can implement 3-to-5 minute, classroom-based physical activities that are associated with improved attention and concentration, on-task classroom behavior, standardized test scores, improved reading literacy and math fluency skills.

Elementary school recess is another opportunity for unstructured physical activity time during the school day. The Pittsfield Public School Wellness policy states that elementary students should receive a 20-minute recess daily. These breaks from classroom activities enhance participation and learning in the classroom, aside from the benefits gained from additional physical activity.

SPARKabc's "Recess" element provides planning, implementation, evaluation resources, and equipment for recess staff looking to improve activity opportunities for all students.

The Pittsfield CAN goal to support the Pittsfield Public Schools by providing teachers with the tools to implement a total of 10-15 minutes of activity in the classroom daily. Activity bursts, in combination with 20 minutes of active recess time, will provide students with 30 minutes of daily school-based physical activity.

Linda Avalle is the Grant Manager for Operation Better Start, a Berkshire Health Systems and Healthy Pittsfield Partner.

This column appears in the Lifestyles section the second Sunday of each month. The Healthy Pittsfield Partnership is coordinated by the Pittsfield Health Department and Board of Health. Partners include community residents, business leaders, health and human service professionals, city officials and health advocates. The partnership is committed to community based initiatives that will improve the health and quality of life of Pittsfield's residents and workforce.

For more information, visit www.cityofpittsfield.org/cityhall/ healthandinspections/healthypittsfield.