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ROGER GONZALEZ/THE NEWS VIRGINIAN

Teachers at Berkeley Glenn Elementary School in Waynesboro participate Thursday in activities as part of SPARK abc's, a program aiming to improve health in children by promoting physical education and nutrition. The school was selected as part of a pilot program through Augusta Health.

Berkeley Glenn, hospital aim to improve student health

BY ROGER GONZALEZ
rgonzalez@newsvirginian.com

Thursday wasn't a normal mid-August day at Berkeley Glenn Elementary School in Waynesboro.

Sure, there was some preparation for the school year, which starts next week. But teachers at the school

spent a few hours of their day moving and learning, with the hope of incorporating activities so their students do the same thing.

As part of a partnership with Augusta Health, teachers at Berkeley Glenn were trained on introducing a culture of physical activity into the school day as part of the "SPARK

abc's" pilot program.

The program is funded by Augusta Health's Community Benefit Committee to address community health priorities, such as obesity and diabetes. Berkeley Glenn was chosen after meetings held with

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superintendents. The two other schools in the program are Augusta County's North River Elementary School and Staunton's Bessie Weller Elementary School. SPARK is a San Diego-based organization dedicated to creating, implementing, and evaluating programs that promote lifelong wellness, but not necessarily physical education classes.

"The message that we are sending to our students is that you have to be concerned about your health," said Waynesboro Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Jeffrey Cassell. "Our personal health is a personal responsibility. If you are not physical health, many other activities in life are impacted by that.

In 2012, a study done by Augusta Health and community agencies identified the top health needs in the area, with overweight and obesity being prevalent. Kara Meeks, community liaison for the hospital, said the goal was to work with children, saying it is where the most change can occur from a mentality

standpoint. SPARK also works with older students in its program.

SPARK's East Coast Program Representative Ellen Ormsby, who is based in Maryland, helped instruct the teachers, many of which plan on incorporating physical activities next week.

"The objective of SPARK is a comprehensive school physical activity program," she said. "So, how do we take the time that children are spending in school and make it as active as we can? Students are spending so much time sitting that we want to provide classroom teachers opportunities, even with limited space, for [students] to move their bodies."

Ormsby said it provides a balance of exercise and a new way to learn, something that has provided quality results.

Activities can be as simple as matching cards or answering questions that requires moving from one side of the room to the other. Other activities include speaking about a subject with a partner in the middle of the room after moving from the sides, keeping your body in motion.

"It is easier to incorporate it," said Tammy Everidge, a kindergarten teacher at the school. "The things that [we have been learning] have given me other ideas of what I can do to. It's great to incorporate. Research shows the more you are active, the more it helps your brain."

Kara Meeks, community liaison for the hospital, said the nationwide goal is for kids to have 60 minutes of quality physical activities a day, knowing many do not.

"Our kids are falling very short of those 60 minutes. This is going to help them both physically and mentality. This gives them movement attached to their lesson plan," she said.

Each class was given a kit with tools to use, such as bean bags, and there are resources, including videos, to use moving forward.

The hope, if this program goes well, is to secure funding to ensure that the program reaches more area schools.

"I'd love to see this expand and just bring a culture of health into our school systems," Meeks said.

For more information, visit SparkPE.org or augustahealth.com.

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