

Foundation Teams up with Area Schools to Fight Obesity

Grants Awarded to Six Public School Districts and Six Preschools

Today's parents are savvy when it comes to protecting their children, from monitoring the internet to screening video games. But few realize that the biggest threat may be where they least expect it... right in their own refrigerators.

The National Institutes of Health has warned that the current generation of American children may be the first generation in two centuries to have shorter life spans than their parents. The leading cause? Not drugs, alcohol or even cancer. Researchers point to childhood obesity. With the percentage of overweight children doubling over the past 20 years, and tripling among adolescents, our nation is in the midst of a true epidemic. An increased prevalence of childhood obesity is expediting the onset of chronic disease and serious health risks, including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Without intervention, health experts predict that obesity may steal up to 5 years from our children's lives.

The Mountainside Health Foundation is teaming up with local schools and preschools to reverse these troubling trends with two innovative programs designed to promote healthy eating and exercise among our region's youth: TEAM HEALTH, a coordinated partnership with public school districts located throughout the West Essex region, and STARTING OUT HEALTHY, a program for preschoolers. These are the first major health initiatives sponsored by the Foundation under its new mission as a public charity. In total, the Mountainside Health Foundation will donate nearly \$80,000 toward projects that will impact more than 2,500 children.

TEAM HEALTH is a school-based program that offers a cooperative approach to combating obesity through health education, nutrition and physical activity. School districts in the 14 towns traditionally served by Mountainside Hospital were invited to submit grant proposals, with funding available for one school per district. Grants have been awarded to the following schools/districts: Brookdale Elementary School/Bloomfield School District; Forest Avenue School/Glen Ridge School District; Grover Cleveland Middle School/Caldwell-West Caldwell School District; Hillside School/Montclair School District; South End School/Cedar Grove School District; and Edison Central 6 Middle School/West Orange School District.

Each participating school developed a multi-faceted program targeting elementary and middle school students. The initiatives will launch this Fall with an array of creative, age-appropriate and results-oriented strategies for inspiring healthier lifestyles for children and their families.

Schools were required to integrate a fitness component into the TEAM HEALTH curriculum to get students on the move. Proposals included a variety of physical activities and motivators, from pedometers to playground games to Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) — an interactive video game that involves dancing to fast-paced music. "DDR offers a great, non-competitive way for kids to exercise and get their hearts

pumping,” said Marie Lanfrank, Caldwell-West Caldwell Education Foundation, which secured the TEAM HEALTH grant for Grover Cleveland Middle School. “Studies show that children playing this exer-game improve their cardiovascular health.”

West Orange’s Edison 6 Middle School will take a different approach by creating individualized fitness plans. “Our population is so diverse that we decided to assess each student’s needs and then gear activities to that child’s interests and fitness level,” explained health/physical education teacher Kristen O’Connell. “The idea is to make students responsible for themselves, getting them to buy into the intrinsic rewards of better health and nutrition.”

Another strategy is the peaceful playground, which will promote cooperative play within structured, safe school environments. While encouraging fitness, games such as Frisbee and hopscotch also promise to reduce injuries, conflict and disciplinary issues on the playground by as much as 50 percent.

Physical activities in the schools will be complemented by nutrition education through “Food Pyramid Bingo,” health fairs, assemblies and other engaging initiatives. Brookdale Elementary School, for example, will allow students to grow herbs and vegetables with AeroGardens. Planting projects will be tailored to each grade level, giving children the opportunity to harvest their “crops” and sample healthy recipes.

Recognizing the importance of early education, STARTING OUT HEALTHY is an obesity prevention program designed especially for preschool children. The initiative will be implemented by Programs for Parents, Inc. in six child care centers located in Montclair, West Orange and Bloomfield. The preschools were selected based on the diversity of the populations they serve.

The STARTING OUT HEALTHY project will feature “Color Me Healthy,” an evidence-based curriculum recommended by the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. A host of fun, interactive activities, such as cooking classes, menu-planning and dancing will promote a culture of nutrition and exercise in the schools. “Our goal is to empower and educate children, their parents and child center staff,” asserted Beverly Lynn, Chief Executive Officer, Programs for Parents, Inc. “At the end of the day, we hope to set a foundation for creating and maintaining healthier lifestyles.”

All of the grant recipients for both TEAM HEALTH and STARTING OUT HEALTHY anticipate positive, measurable outcomes from their programs, including reductions in the number of overweight children (as determined by body mass index) and improvements in physical fitness, nutrition practices and other health indicators.

“We’re excited and optimistic about the impact these initiatives will have on the health of children in our communities,” added Pam Scott, Chief Foundation Officer, Mountainside Health Foundation. “We look forward to reviewing the outcomes and involving more schools next year.”

Those interested in joining the fight against childhood obesity with a tax-deductible donation toward TEAM HEALTH and STARTING OUT HEALTHY may contact The Mountainside Health Foundation at (973) 746-6130 or at www.mshfoundation.org.