

The Power of Parents



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HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

It's mid-morning and the Mom Brigade has hit the gym now that the kids are off to school. But the conversation continues to focus on the little ones – their homework, their friends, their challenges with teachers, and even the subject of what their kids will or won't eat – at school and at home.

"I'm so frustrated," says one parent. "My son needs to lose weight, but because he was talking too loudly in the cafeteria, they punished him by taking away his recess, which is time he needs to get a little exercise."

She laments the missed opportunity for physical activity during what is otherwise a fairly sedentary day for her fifth-grader, whom she is working with to instill healthier habits.

"I just can't believe the things they serve," says another. "My son can go through the lunch line and get chips, cupcakes and an orange drink – and call that lunch. And they actually have a day where they serve the kids a huge funnel cake with syrup! I'm not

against treats, but that's ridiculous, because so many kids will just eat that instead of their lunch."

Across Pennsylvania, schools are making huge strides in offering healthier choices – in the areas of both nutrition and physical activity. But there's still a long way to go, and parents can be the key to making those changes happen.

Administrators agree that when parents come to them with issues they value, schools are likely to sit up and pay attention.

"It's not that we don't want to focus on these things," says Quakertown School Superintendent Jim Scanlon. "But there are so many things that schools are charged with – primarily all the tests required by No Child Left Behind. Test scores are what we are forced to focus on, and other things suffer as a result. So if a school knows it can count on a parents to support initiatives like getting kids more physically active, it will make it much easier for a school to devote attention to that."

A new federal law requires all school districts that receive federal lunch money to develop wellness policies by June 2006. Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity (PANA), a statewide non-profit established by the Pennsylvania Department of Health and funded in part by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, worked with the Pennsylvania Department of Education to offer a statewide training session last fall to show districts how to develop these policies. Under law, a local wellness committee must be the one to write this policy – and in many districts, that committee is taking the form of a School Health Council.

School Health Councils are representative groups of teachers, administrators, parents, students and community members who meet to discuss matters of school health. They are responsible for leading healthy eating and

Allyson Hotz and her daughter, Stephanie, along with Marybeth Panaro and her son, Kevin, who receive toe tokens and certificates for Tredyfrin-Easttown School District's mileage club for walking during recess.





physical activity initiatives and setting the tone for a culture that promotes healthy habits.

“In our experiences working with hundreds of schools across Pennsylvania, the ones that are most successful in making positive changes are the ones that have school health councils and also strong parent support,” says PANA’s Executive Director, Allison Topper.

Parents in the Tredyffrin-Easttown School District in Chester County understand the importance of a healthy environment in their children’s schools and have learned just how powerful their voices can be when it comes to making healthy changes. A small but motivated group of them got involved, worked with the administration to design changes that became institutionalized in the school district’s culture – from what’s served in the lunchroom to the way students are encouraged to be active, year-round.

“It’s about making small changes that aren’t too radical,” says Mary Beth Panaro. “We have tried to take a balanced approach because it can’t be just the health nuts or exercise fanatics; It’s got to be every day parents who want kids to have good choices available to them.”

But those small changes contributed to big shifts in the options kids have at school and the emphasis the district is now placing on nutrition and physical activity.

“We didn’t go in there to criticize,” says parent Allyson Hotz. “We went in to say that we thought there were some things – some small changes – that the district could do that could make a big difference.”

Hotz, a former cardiac care nurse who also has a business background, talked with fellow parent Amy Greenlaw, now a full-time nutrition educator in the School District of Philadelphia. The two decided to address their school board about concerns that students have more access to healthy choices and the role that health plays in academics. They put a packet of information together for the district superintendent, who then asked them to meet with his cabinet, comprised of the top administrators from the schools in the district.

“We used a PowerPoint presentation that PANA provided on its website, and made a case for the need to address the epidemic of childhood obesity and to make healthy changes in our school district,” says Hotz. “The administration’s reaction was that indeed it is a big, important issue, but that any new initiatives would need to be parent powered at the start.”

Allyson and Amy held two general meetings – one during the school day and one after school – which were attended by administrators, parents, school nurses, the district’s food service director, and teachers, including health, family and consumer science, and physical education teachers. Community representatives were invited from fitness centers, the YMCA, the county health department and a local hospital. The group decided to form a district school health council, with representatives from each school’s PTO, to formally address the issues.

The council decided that elementary schools were the ones most in need of nutrition education, so parents began a push to

make some changes.

“We found in elementary schools that kids are very open to accepting healthy options at classroom parties,” says Panaro. “So we’ve suggested that in addition to bringing in cupcakes, parents bring in veggies, dips and fruit, juice and bottled water. That way it’s not a radical change. We’re not taking away the cupcakes – we’re just adding carrots. And it turns out the kids love them.”

The district’s new food and nutritional service director agreed to meet with the parent group and given their support,

TIPS FOR PARENTS WHO WANT TO HELP CREATE HEALTHIER SCHOOLS:

- 1 – Before you try to address a large group of parents or staff members, get an in-person meeting set up with a school district administrator. This may help you generate support for your efforts so you don’t appear to be one fanatical parent pushing for change.
- 2 – Use PANA’s PowerPoints and materials from their website www.panaonline.org including the Action Kits for Change. This helps make your case and lends credibility to your efforts.
- 3 – Approach administrators by recognizing what the district is already doing. Make it a partnership. Don’t just blast in there and criticize. It is also important to recognize the unique climate at each school.
- 4 – Don’t just talk about all the things you’d like to change – focus on one thing that you can change. For instance, it’s relatively easy for a school to order baked snacks instead of fried snacks and reduce the amount of unhealthy beverages that are served and sold.
- 5 – Focus on non-controversial, positive programs and changes to get started.
- 6 – Reach out to parents: Send communication home to families since habits are forming at home; Highlight solutions to parents that are quick and easy, yet still healthy, such as adding fresh fruits and veggies to your child’s snack and drinking water and low fat milk products.

was quick to make a lot of changes under consideration, particularly at the elementary level. Ice cream and other high-fat snacks were replaced with healthier choices. ‘Super-sized’ treats like cookies were eliminated and replaced with smaller portions. Sugary beverages were eliminated as well. A salad bar, funded by the PTO, was introduced and a salad platter option made available at other schools.

“We tried to tie all of this into the community by going to sporting groups – soccer, t-ball, etc., and talked to the



coaches at their meetings,” says Allyson. “We asked them to think about the snacks children are being provided. Instead of bringing a juice box and a bag of Doritos for the kids, who probably haven’t exercised enough to need a snack, we asked them to consider bringing a healthier snack like water and fruit. Now more and more teams are doing that. It was a simple matter of awareness of old habits. It’s one way to try to reach out to the community.”

The group also sent an article to teachers, coaches and administrators at the middle and high school about how to healthfully refuel after a workout. “A lot of our work is focusing at the elementary level and then it works its way up,” says Hotz.

Parents help the schools run a “Feeling Good Mileage Club” (www.fitnessfinders.com) where students walk at recess and their mileage is tracked and charted. At one school, the principal announces the names of students each week who have met their goals, and they are awarded a small “Toe Token” for their shoelaces. The club, which is optional, usually begins with 100 percent participation and retains more than half of its walkers or joggers by the end of the program. Some schools also track student body mileage and allow kids to ‘walk’ to a destination, which the students then study in class. “Allowing schools some flexibility in the program gives them ownership of the activities,” says Panaro.

Parents staff the recesses to record student laps. “We’re lucky in this area that parents are very involved in the schools,” says Hotz. “The schools try to be very flexible and accommodating where parent volunteerism is concerned, especially if it is to support healthy habits.”

“And it’s a school,” says Panaro. “So we should be teaching good habits.” At other school districts, parents have been actively involved in staffing after-school fitness clubs for students, developing healthy eating and fitness newsletters for schools, and helping to coordinate fun activities and events that help students focus on the importance of good nutrition and activity.

Parents know that there is strength in numbers, and many have told PANA that they have had more success when they’ve been able to form a small group that can collectively address the school board or administration about their concerns and desire to be involved. Some have had great success by talking, first, at a PTA or PTO meeting, to get support from other parents. And some have been able to connect with a school nurse or a health or physical education teacher who shares their passion for teaching healthy habits.

“Overwhelmingly, schools have been very receptive to parents – at least when they are approached in a calm, reasonable, positive fashion,” says Topper. “It won’t do any good to go in there as the ‘food police’ or to try to make too many drastic changes too quickly. Recognize that schools have lots of pressures and responsibilities, and try to find ways that you can help, rather than add to their workload.”

One of the easiest ways to help is by asking your school to enroll in PANA’s free Keystone Healthy Zone Schools program, which provides resources, training, materials and support for schools, and shows them how to make healthy



changes. PANA is a non-profit coalition established in 2003 by the PA Department of Health and is funded in part by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

PANA was able to collect data from each of the schools in its program and in fall, 2005, released its first statewide school health report card. “This was important because it gave us some good, solid baseline data about the policies and practices of our schools,” says Topper. “We now have data on how many of them offer sodas in their vending machines, how much physical education kids are getting, etc. By looking at things like that we can start to gauge future progress.”

Schools must enroll in PANA’s free Keystone Healthy Zone

IN JUST ONE YEAR OF INVOLVEMENT WITH THE KEYSTONE HEALTHY ZONE PROGRAM, SCHOOLS SHOWED SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT:

- 84 percent increase in the number of schools that had School Health Councils
- 35 percent increase in the number of schools reporting they had a policy related to foods and beverages
- 30 percent improvement in the number of schools that encourage students to participate in before-school and after-school physical activity programs
- 47 percent increase in the number of schools trying to correct hazardous walking conditions within a mile of the school, so that students can walk or bike to school

School program each year. This year, the enrollment period is from March 1 through April 21, 2006. To enroll, simply log onto www.panaonline.org and complete an online assessment about your current policies and practices regarding nutrition and physical activity.