

Young Journalists Deliver Public Health Message

The reporters left the staff meeting intent to understand several pressing issues: Why hasn't hand sanitizer been installed in a far wing of the school? When would the walking trail be built? What prompted the cafeteria to change its meal tickets?

While these concerns might not be typical front-page fodder for *The New York Times*, they are intriguing for these fourth-grade reporters and the readers of their school health newspaper. By delving into subjects that matter in their school community, they are directly engaging their classmates, parents and teachers with health information that is relevant in their daily lives. In the process, their publications help advance the proposed Healthy People 2020 objective of increasing "knowledge and skills," as outlined in the National Health Education Standards — a set of goals that educators and organizations can use to develop curriculum for elementary, middle and high schools.¹

The fourth-grade reporters are part of the Healthy Times Student Media program that began in Upper Darby, PA in 2003 and has expanded to a dozen schools in the Philadelphia region. The program teaches children basic journalism skills so they can produce relevant and engaging publications to heighten awareness about health, fitness, nutrition and safety. Writing becomes their means to foster positive changes in their schools and communities.

"I've heard and seen that kids are excited about eating healthier," wrote one student newspaper staff member in a survey. "I think we should keep encouraging the kids." The newspaper "acted like a role model to people because it helped my family eat healthier," wrote another young reporter.

Each school program sets up its own "mini city room" staffed with students who pledge to write fairly, accurately and clearly. They must attribute information to reliable websites and other sources, and promise they won't copy other people's work.

The journalists, who are typically in third through eighth grades, gather information primarily through interviews with classmates, nurses, physical education teachers and other school personnel. They also query

outside health experts by telephone or in school-based press conferences.

At the invitation of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), five students covered the "Weight of the Nation Conference" in July 2009. Their interview subjects included the Acting Surgeon General and top CDC officials. More recently, a group of sixth graders attended the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting in Philadelphia and were briefed on topics such as the National Physical Activity Plan.

The student journalists write news and feature stories, review health-related books and websites, and participate in taste tests that expose them to smoothies, avocados and other healthy food. They also contribute illustrations and games, and oversee newspaper-sponsored activities such as a healthy poetry contest. Each paper is typically two or four pages and generally includes between three and 10 articles.

After an issue is printed (up to four times a year), the young reporters often help promote or distribute it throughout the school building. The reporters in one school handed out their free papers while singing a nutrition song penned by the music teacher and two students specifically for the school publication. Grants, donations and volunteers help support the program.

The response to these newspapers is very positive. In a 2009 evaluation conducted by The Food Trust, a Philadelphia nonprofit, the 26 teachers who responded to a survey said they would recommend that other schools have a Healthy Times newspaper. Eighty-one percent said the newspaper has a positive impact on the health beliefs or attitudes of their students.

Among 240 surveyed third and fourth grade students who read a Healthy Times newspaper, 80 percent would recommend a paper to other schools and 73 percent learned something about being healthy from the paper.

"This year I read about (a school teacher)... she runs every day. I think I should go outside more than I usually do," wrote one reader. Another student wrote, "After I used the tips that the (newspaper) gave me, I felt less stressed."

In one evaluation conducted by The Food Trust, a sample of 12 newspapers was reviewed to assess whether the content addressed the eight National Health Education Standards.¹ The standards, developed by a joint committee of national health organizations, are "written expectations for what students should know" about health by certain grades. For the purposes of this evaluation, a newspaper issue that satisfied at least one indicator for each standard was counted as having addressed that standard. Through this analysis, it was found that all 12 newspapers dealt with at least six of the eight standards, giving schools a hands-on resource for health education instruction. To date, newspapers have been developed independently of these standards, making this an intriguing finding for future program development.

The healthy newspapers deliver more than health facts; they provoke critical thinking about current, complex health issues inside and outside of the school environment. They also promote literacy and can be used as creative teaching tools. A major focus moving forward will be on increasing teacher engagement, and developing materials and messages that will promote the use of Healthy Times newspapers as a teaching tool.

Looking to the future, an ideal model would be the implementation of school policies for using the newspapers in ways that address literacy and health education requirements. In its next stage of development, the Healthy Times program plans to further develop its curriculum and to create an interactive website to support schools. As it grows, the program is interested in forming new partnerships to broaden its reach. Healthy Times recognizes the value of evidence-based methods, and for this reason, will conduct further in-depth evaluation to illustrate the program's impact and its evolution. ■

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