

Public health and local school target obesity

“My mom drains the juice from our meat now.” It’s a simple sentence. It’s a simple concept. More important, it represents simple but badly needed behavior changes among children at Grant Wood Elementary School in Iowa City, Iowa.

A 2006 survey showed that 25 percent of the students at Grant Wood were overweight or obese. In addition, three of every five children enrolled there are currently receiving free or reduced price lunches—twice the average for schools in the 11,000-student district.

Fortunately, a partnership of health advocates led by the Johnson County Public Health Department is addressing the dire situation at the school by holding a series of events called “Family Night Out.” Designed to help families expand their understanding of health-related topics, increase physical activity levels, and improve nutrition, the program had humble beginnings.

The first event, held in February 2009, featured an introduction to health-related vocabulary, a demonstration of fitness testing using a heart-shaped obstacle course, servings of whole wheat lentil goulash, and ideas for increasing fruit and vegetable intake. The event drew 35 participants.

“There’s nothing health educators enjoy more than seeing the light bulbs go on over people’s



Kaalon Williams (2nd grade) and brother read about health topics with Ms. Julie Dailey from Grant Wood Elementary School.

heads at events like this,” said Douglas Beardsley, director of Johnson County Public Health. “But only 35? While the school was graciously providing us with the space to hold these events, we realized we hadn’t done enough to promote them. A school is more than a location; it’s a community, and we needed to tap into that.”

That’s when organizers began sending invitations home with children participating in Operation Backpack, a program which sends low-income children home from school with backpacks filled with nutritious, kid-friendly foods, such as cereal, canned pasta, pop top soup, fruit cups and boxed drinks. Project partners also began promoting Family Night Out through students’ “Friday Folders,” which homeroom teachers use to communicate with parents about class assignments, school news, etc.

For the second event, participation nearly tripled. That night, more than 90 people showed up to learn about body mass index, find out how to

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- Douglas Beardsley

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remove fat from cooked ground beef, and enjoy a nutritious taco salad. Organizers enhanced their promotional efforts further by giving each child a sticker to wear home advertising Family Night Out. By the third event, which included sub sandwiches and setting goals using pedometers, participation was nearing 200.

“In addition to some fantastic promotion by our partners, we know that the success of the program can also be attributed to word-of-mouth among the participants,” Beardsley added. “The growth of the program has been a statement of the need for health programming among a population whose health literacy levels, physical activity habits, and nutrition options are very limited. We’re trying to change that.”

With two more events scheduled in 2010, organizers are being very deliberate about measuring their successes. Following each Family Night Out, participants are asked to describe some of the behavior changes they have made because of these events. One family says they have switched to whole wheat bread after being taught which ingredients they should look for on the label. A number of families have noted that they are going outside more for physical activity. One gentleman even tried making a whole wheat pizza from scratch. “The kids loved it and it was heartier,” he noted.

Partners in the Family Night Out effort have included Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa City Community School District, and 5 to 10 community volunteers per event. Family Night Out is supported by a Community Wellness Grant administered by the Iowa Department of Public



Family Night Out participants play nutrition bingo with Jan Martin from the Iowa State University Extension Office.

Health, a grant program which uses funds from the Iowa Legislature and federal dollars secured by U.S. Senator from Iowa Tom Harkin. To learn more about all 24 Community Wellness projects, also known as the Iowa Healthy Communities Initiatives, visit www.idph.state.ia.us/hcr_committees/physical_fitness.asp and look under “Prevention and Wellness Initiatives.”