

Getting Healthy



TOPIC: NUTRITION

DISTRICT: CAMPO RE-6

LOCATION: CAMPO, COLO.

INTRODUCTION

A health and wellness program in Campo School District targets students and employees, but it is also affecting the community. Residents are now serving more fruit and vegetables at potlucks, church gatherings, bridal and baby showers, and funeral dinners.

OUR STORY

With just 54 students, Campo School District, located in rural Baca County, is one of the smallest in the state. The entire K-12 district fits in one long building, with 15 classrooms, a library, a gym and a cafeteria. Campo itself is tiny, with just 125 residents, many of whom work in farming or ranching. The nearest big city—Amarillo, Texas—is about a three-hour drive.

“We’re definitely a small community,” says Campo librarian Coantha Johnson. “It seems like you’re either related to someone or you’re married to someone who’s related to everyone else.” Indeed, Coantha’s husband is a first cousin of school Superintendent Nikki Johnson. And the head cook, Kay Thompson, is Nikki’s sister-in-law.



did you know...

... that the new federal **Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010** establishes science-based nutrition standards for all school foods sold outside of meal programs, and a 2008 Colorado law requires school districts to set minimum nutrition standards for beverages sold in vending machines, a la carte purchases and school stores?

In 2009, Nikki Johnson decided it was time to launch a health and wellness campaign aimed at students and employees. She had heard about the opportunity to apply for a grant from the Colorado Legacy Foundation (CLF), and she thought the grant would fit the district’s needs. The cafeteria’s two cooks had long been making most meals from scratch, but there was definitely room for improvement. For example, there was a salad bar counter, but it was often used for nonsalad items. Candy, chips and soda pop were easily available from five vending machines, and teachers were seeing the effects of all that sugar in the classroom.

“There were at least a few students drinking several pops or energy drinks every day,” says Coantha Johnson. “You

could tell when they were high from too much sugar because they'd become unfocused. Then the sugar would wear off and they'd crash—and become even more unfocused.” One student would skip breakfast, have a candy bar and a can of pop for lunch, and then occasionally pass out in the afternoon.

SOLUTIONS

Campo's health and wellness campaign, called “Let's Get Healthy,” is supported by a two-year, \$20,000 CLF grant. The program aims to increase awareness of good nutrition among students and employees. In addition, it encourages teachers and other staff members to make healthier choices and be healthier role models.

“Our goal is to change eating habits,” says Nikki Johnson, “and to change the way people think about what it means to be healthy.” She asked Coantha Johnson, who has an interest in healthy living, to head up the campaign.

One of the first things she did was to remove all soda pop from the vending machines. Now there is just one beverage machine with sports drinks and bottled water, and the snack machine sells only healthy options such as nuts, pretzels and 100 Calorie Packs. “No candy whatsoever,” she says.



did you know...

... that studies have shown when recess is before lunch, children ate 24 percent more food, wasted 30 percent less food, consumed 8 percent more calories, and consumed 35 percent more calcium and 13 percent more vitamin A?

To encourage students to eat healthier snacks, Johnson came up with “Thursday Tasties.” For each letter of the alphabet being taught to kindergarteners, Johnson makes a snack that begins with that letter. For the letter Y, yam smoothies. For R, ratatouille. For Z, fresh zucchini. For M, mangoes. “Many of them had never had a fresh mango before,” she says.

And that's the point: to expose students to things they may not have tasted before while demonstrating the value of eating fresh fruit and vegetables.

In the cafeteria, salad is now a daily lunch option for students and employees, and the cooks are using more whole-grain flour in breads and pastas. Of Campo's 54 students, 38 qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Most students eat school lunches, and many eat school breakfasts as well.

Until recently, recess was right after lunch, and some students would barely touch their food in order to get more time on the playground. “I don't even think they tasted half of what they ate,” Johnson says. Now recess comes before lunch. “And we see the students sitting in the cafeteria actually enjoying their food.”

Johnson used some of the CLF grant money to buy pedometers for the district's 20 employees, and she enrolled them in the Mega Mileage Club, a

competitive exercise program. She also purchased additional exercise equipment for the weight room. High school science teacher Cherilyn England, who also teaches physical education classes, has worked closely with employees to create individual exercise programs. “Some want to lose weight,” says England, a certified personal trainer, “but most are just interested in becoming more healthy.”

RESULTS

“Campo students and employees are making healthier choices,” Coantha Johnson says. “It isn’t uncommon to see or hear students choosing a fresh fruit item over a candy bar, or opting for the cookie with dried fruit in it instead of chocolate chips.” One of the biggest surprises, she adds, is that “our students love this healthy stuff!” More students are eating school-cooked meals, both breakfast and lunch.

The salad bar, says junior Emmaleah Smith, has been a big hit among her friends. “Before the salad bar came along,” she says, “a lot of kids would skip lunch because they didn’t like the food, or they’d just pick at their food but not really enjoy it.” Now, she says, everyone’s eating salad.

Megan England (Cherilyn’s sister), also a junior, has seen a difference at after-school meetings. “Instead of chips and candy bars,” she says, “the school provides carrots and celery.”

Junior Keshian Hoeffner says she has noticed that some of her friends “are more active and energized for class” because of the healthier food options. When asked if there is anything she would like to see added to the lunch menu, she replies, “Brussels sprouts!”

Meanwhile, teachers are drinking more water and less pop, and they are snacking on dried fruit, nuts or yogurt. Many employees are walking and exercising more or taking Zumba Fitness classes after school.

Because Campo is such a small community, the district’s health and wellness efforts have reached beyond the school walls. Coantha Johnson says there has been a “noticeable difference” in the food now being served at potlucks, church gatherings, bridal and baby showers, and funeral dinners. “It isn’t unusual now for several people to bring fresh fruit and vegetables in place of cookies,” she says.



WHAT'S NEXT

The focus on health and wellness at Campo is becoming “a way of life,” Johnson says. She feels certain that even without grant money, the district will continue to support the Let’s Get Healthy campaign. The school board is committed to seeing the program continue and has pledged to budget accordingly “as much as possible.”

One challenge has been trying to convince the district’s longtime cooks to try new recipes. One of their concerns has been to make sure that all meals continue to meet federal nutrition guidelines. Coantha Johnson is planning to buy software that will help the cooks convert familiar recipes and create new ones that still meet federal requirements.

A complicating factor at Campo is that the head cook, Kay Thompson, is Nikki Johnson’s sister-in-law.

“We want to have a good working relationship,” Johnson says, “so we have been trying to use gentle nudges as much as possible. And I think [the cooks] are now willing to accept more of our ideas.”

Coantha Johnson adds, “They’re used to doing things a certain way, and they’re always thinking about what the kids like. I think we kind of scared them when we started this. They thought they were going to have to change everything they were doing.” That was never the case, especially since much of the food is made

from scratch. But Johnson would like to see some healthier menu items. For now, however, she’s grateful for the daily salad bar.

“It’s baby steps,” she says, “but we’re very happy with the baby steps we’ve taken.”

ABOUT US

District: *Campo RE-6*

Location: *Campo, Colo.*

Number of students: *54*

Percentage of students
who qualify for free or reduced
lunch: *70 percent*

BEFORE AND AFTER

Before: Soda pop and candy available from vending machines. Salad served only occasionally in cafeteria. Recess after lunch.

After: Healthier options sold in vending machines. Daily salad bar in lunchroom. “Thursday Tasties.” Recess before lunch. Mega Mileage Club for employees. Additional exercise equipment.

DOING IT FOR FREE

Some parts of Campo’s Let’s Get Healthy campaign cost little or nothing. There is no cost to moving recess from after to before lunch, for example. And there was little expense in removing those pop machines. Exercise programs for teachers are easy to implement, even without prizes and incentives.

did you know...

... that healthy employees are more productive, have lower absentee rates and lower health care costs?

ADVICE

Superintendent Nikki Johnson is committed to changing habits and ways of thinking. Her advice for other districts that want to make similar changes:

- Take the time to do it well. “Look at your needs, and set some fairly realistic goals. You’re not going to change everything overnight.”
- Educate staff, parents and the community. “Start by educating people about what you’re doing and why. Reach out to the community. You can’t make a difference with kids unless you try to make a difference in their homes.”
- Convene a wellness team. “Make sure you get the right people on board, including key staff members. You can cover more areas with more people.”
- Avoid pushing too hard. “In a small community, it’s very important not to create bad blood. Change happens gradually. Sometimes you have to nudge people along.”

MORE HELP

Action for Healthy Kids

www.a4hk.org/state_profile.php?state=CO

Visit this website for data about obesity and physical education, and to learn how Colorado compares to other states when it comes to state policy affecting student health and nutrition.

Center for Science in the Public Interest

www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/junkfoodquiz.html

Test your knowledge of junk foods in school by taking a quiz from the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Colorado Legacy Foundation’s Best Practices Guide in Health and Wellness for Colorado School Districts
www.colegacy.org/guide_2009/default.php

Find data; best practices for school districts; and action steps for administrators, school board members, parents and the community. Topics include health education, nutrition, physical activity, school health services, workplace wellness and bullying prevention.

“Look at your needs, and set some fairly realistic goals. You’re not going to change everything overnight.”

- Nikki Johnson, Superintendent, Campo School District





CONTACT US

Coantha Johnson
Health and Wellness Coordinator
Campo School District
(719) 787-2226
coantha.johnson@campo.k12.co.us



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