

LET'S GO! 5210 Goes to School program tackles childhood obesity

BY SADA REED
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Students holding Dance Revolution and Wii parties is not uncommon at Mahoney Middle School in South Portland.

A DDR or Wii party with friends is the reward for students who read a book, complete a story summary and have their name pulled from a monthly drawing. The parties are part of a school-wide effort to reduce the use of food as a reward and to increase physical activity during the school day, said Mahoney Middle School principal Kathryn Germani. "Teachers can sign it out and use it to get their kids involved as a reward for good behavior and positive academic gain," Germani said. "It's gone great. One of the first things we did, we had a group of students teach teachers how to us it. The students love it."

Mahoney Middle School made the purchase after receiving a mini-grant from Let's Go!, a five-year, community-based demonstration project that was launched in 2006 in order to address Maine's growing rate of childhood obesity. In the long term, Let's Go! was set up to improve the health status of children and to reduce health care costs. But the project's immediate focus is to increase the proportion of children who engage daily in healthy behaviors.

Because environmental factors shape how children view health and fitness, Let's Go! reaches out to four settings: Education, workplace, healthcare and community. A branch of Let's Go!, called Let's Go! 5210 Goes to School, is the program's education outreach program. Let's Go! 5210 Goes to School is a project of the Kids co-op of the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital at Maine Medical Center and initially began in nine schools in York County in 2006.

The 5210 stands for the four positive health behaviors recommended to increase physical activity, healthy eating and overall healthy living: Eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables on most days; limiting screen time (computers, television and electronic games) to two hours or less daily; participating in at least one hour of physical activity every day; and avoiding soda and sugar-sweetened drinks.

The suggestions provided in Let's Go! 5210 Goes to School brochures do not promote the "same old, same old" guidelines for healthy living. The pamphlets use current research to highlight the sometimes hidden culprits of obesity, like using food as a reward, allowing unlimited use of computers or television, taking less than three bites of new fruits or vegetables and deciding it's not tasty, and understating the role adults play in developing a child's lifelong habits.

As the Let's Go! 5210 Goes to School program shows, there is help for schools interested in looking for creative ways to implement healthier practices and to encourage a whole community to make better choices, said Let's Go! assistant project director Jessica Straco.

"In order for a school to be eligible (for mini-

grants), they need to be considered a Let's Go! school," Straco said.

To become a Let's go! school, the school contacts a school intervention coordinator like Heidi Kessler, who shows schools how get started by helping them focus on an issue the school would like to tackle and finding a plan for implementing the goal.

Schools do this by forming a wellness team, which is usually comprised of a physical education teacher, the school nurse, the school nutrient director, possibly a parent and the principal, but it doesn't necessarily have to be these people. Because it can be hard to start groups, it may be easier for schools to use a group that's already established and designate one person in the group as "the champion." "The champion" is in charge of relaying information from the team to the school intervention coordinator and keeps the team on task.

Once the group is formed, the school receives a resource kit, which provides teachers and school health coordinators with lesson plans, handouts, strategies and resources for incorporating Let's Go! 5210 Goes to School messages into the school day. Participating schools then receive workshops from Let's Go! staff and have the opportunity to apply for mini grants.

"(The schools) can do anything they want, within the 5210 strategy," Kessler said. "Some of them include encouraging healthy snacks and celebrations. In their first year, we recommend one to three steps, as small steps are a big deal. We're working with schools where they're at. We're providing them with a framework and we help support them."

Kessler said two elementary schools last year wanted to focus on encouraging water and low-fat milk instead of sweetened beverages. A wellness team came up with a plan, presented it to the rest of the staff and implemented the plan by revamping its water foundation, providing education to staff and

parents about being hydrated, bringing in a local pediatrician to talk about effects of sugar on bottles and encouraging the staff to have water bottles on their desk.

"It really seems to work and we got some hard data back from it," Kessler said.

Word of the program's success and the opportunity it provides for schools spread throughout the greater Portland region — not just by word of mouth, but also through the organizations that support the effort, including Arthen Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Maine, Hannaford Brothers Co., MaineHealth, Maine Medical Center, JD Banknorth, Unum and United Way of Greater Portland.

"We found it's been incredibly needed," Kessler said. "There isn't a lot of funding for wellness at schools right now, so they're drawn to realizing they have funds. I think they appreciate the flexibility of what's happening; they get to look at their school and decide what works for them. We've been able to offer a helping hand and it's been unbelievable watching them rise to the occasion."

Let's Go! would like to continue partnering with interested community members and schools — whether in existing community teams or by forming new teams — to keep initiating more ways in which increase physical activity and healthy living.

And whether a school or community's goals are big or small, there is help in getting such plans underway, Germani said.

"It's a great grant. We'd love to see more schools get into it," Germani said. "And I will say, it's a relatively easy grant to be able to write, so people without a lot of grant writing experience have a shot."

For more information, go to www.lets-go.org or call (207) 874-1000. For information specifically for Let's Go! 5210 Goes to School, go to www.mmc.org/mmc_body.cfm?id=3614.