

Kittery, York schools to seek national nutrition honor

Initiative recognizes work toward healthier choices

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YORK, Maine — Eight school nutrition directors representing 11 school districts in southern Maine — including Kittery and York — recently submitted a joint application to the highly competitive U.S. Department of Agriculture's HealthierUS School Challenge.

The challenge is a voluntary initiative established in 2004 to recognize schools participating in the National School Lunch Program that have created healthier school environments through promotion of nutrition and physical activity. About 1 percent of all applicants nationwide go on to receive the school challenge designation.

The York County group began working together in 2010 to get the application together. Heidi Kessler, school nutrition manager at Maine Medical Center in Portland, was hired as facilitator with funding from Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation and the Walmart Foundation.

Several years ago, Kessler convened school nutrition directors in the Portland area with the goal to reduce childhood obesity.

"We knew that if we were going to have any impact on kids and healthy eating that we had to have the school nutrition directors as our partners," she said.

Doris Demers, food services director for the York and Kittery schools, as well as directors of other York County school districts, subsequently asked Kessler to help them develop their nutrition programs.

"We were very lucky that this need was acknowledged, and we received the funding from Harvard Pilgrim and Walmart so that I could work in York County," Kessler said.

She started a work group that began meeting in September 2010 and included nearly every York County school nutrition director.

The group developed two goals, to increase nutritional quality of the food in schools by making the school food better; and to improve the perception of school food by letting people know it has changed.

"We decided as a group that the best way to improve school food and to get positive recognition was to work towards the USDA HealthierUS School Challenge," Kessler said.

The program is a lot of work, she added.

"It's a huge application and they have to make significant changes to their menus," she said. "So we worked on the application for the past year. They shared recipes, shared vendor information."

Kessler provided support by making presentations to schools and to school boards.

The HealthierUS School Challenge provides criteria for improving nutritional quality.

"It says you have to offer beans one day a week; you have to do whole grains three days a week; you have to do dark green and orange vegetables three days a week — it gave us really concrete goals to work toward," she said.

"Once people know they have this award ... then they will think differently about school lunch," she said.