



Engaging Parents in School Wellness: Lessons Learned by the Virginia Action for Healthy Kids Team

How do you successfully engage parents as partners in boosting school wellness? This past school year, the Virginia Action for Healthy Kids Team set out to find the answer.

Armed with a \$25,000 Team grant from Action for Healthy Kids, made possible by the Kellogg Corporate Citizenship Fund, the Team launched a competitive mini-grant program aimed at involving parents, teachers and children in improving nutrition and physical activity in rural schools. The winning proposals had to provide wellness experiences both outside the school lunch program and physical education classes.

Nutrition Objectives by School Division	
School Division	Nutrition Objective
Mathews	Parent Introduction to Healthy Eating (elementary school)
	Health/Nutrition Class for 5 th grade
* Montgomery County	Nonfood Rewards (elementary school)
Orange County	Action Attraction (food tasting) – Boys & Girls Club after-school
Spotsylvania County	Using Parents to Promote Healthy Rewards in Classrooms (elementary school)
Waynesboro (City)	Healthy Snacks (parent education, classroom presentations) – elementary school

* Montgomery County also developed a PowerPoint Presentation: Local School Wellness Policy (teachers, administrators, division-wide)

From a pool of 22 applications, five mini-grants of \$4,000 each were awarded in the spring of 2006 to schools in Mathews County, Montgomery County, Orange County, Spotsylvania County and Waynesboro (City).

“Overall I believe that we made a positive impact on student health through these mini-grants, especially in raising teacher awareness and providing new opportunities for student access to physical activity and better nutrition,” said Elena Serrano, Co-Chair, Virginia Action for Healthy Kids Team. “The fact is that some projects were more successful than others. Those that worked well were the ones where principals and parents took a strong interest and got personally involved.”

“We found that getting parents involved can be very difficult because they are so busy,” said Kathy Hosig, the Virginia Team’s program evaluator. “Another surprise was the resistance from some teachers, particularly with the nonfood reward program. Despite the health implications, some teachers prefer hanging on to their established way of doing things. They fear losing control.”

Fortunately, all of the local project coordinators found parents, principals and teachers who were very interested in helping advance student wellness. Despite some real-world challenges, the Virginia Team mini-grant program resulted in a wide range of effective school wellness initiatives.

Parents Promote Healthy Rewards in Classrooms

As a conscientious parent and registered dietician, Michele Lewis knows all too well that using food as a reward can undermine healthy eating habits and also take a toll on children’s health. Lewis used the mini-grant provided by the Virginia Team to encourage teachers in four elementary schools in Montgomery County to provide nonfood rewards in the classroom.

“Although some people see food rewards as harmless little treats, the truth is this can lead to big issues down the road for some children, said Lewis. “Teachers who participated in our program understand this and learned that nonfood rewards can be just as effective as giving out candy treats.”

Lewis’ first step toward building the program was meeting with the principal at each school. By listening to them, she learned that the best way to implement her project was to support the role of teachers as *decision makers* in the classroom.

“The principals advised us not to dictate what nonfood rewards teachers could use, but rather to support their leadership role in the classroom,” Lewis said. “Hearing what principals had to say was critical to our success. When principals care about an issue, teachers usually will make it a priority.”

Physical Activity Objectives by School Division	
School Division	Physical Activity Objective
Mathews	GYM (Get Yourself Moving) – elementary school
	TrackPack (grades 1-4)
Montgomery County	Happy Feet Walking Club (elementary school)
Orange County	Action Attraction (Boys & Girls Club after-school walking program with pedometers)
Spotsylvania County	<i>Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge™</i> (middle school)
	Learning in Motion (elementary school)
Waynesboro (City)	After-School Walking Program (middle school)

The only criteria given to teachers participating in the program were that the rewards must be nonfood and that a student could not be denied recess break as a disciplinary measure. To encourage participation, teachers involved in the program were entered into a monthly drawing for a \$25 gift card.

“When that first gift card was awarded, the lines of communication really opened up. Word spread fast to other teachers and then participation took off,” said Lewis.

Additionally, participating schools each received \$150 to use toward wellness activities at the end of the four month program.

“Our project gave schools a concrete way to support their new Wellness Policy. Teachers replaced food items in treasure chests with various trinkets – some teachers even purchased items using their own money. Others rewarded students with extra time at recess,” Lewis said.

According to Lewis, in all four schools, the program generated heightened awareness about the importance of nutrition and exercise, both among students and faculty. In one school, the program prompted the principal to begin putting wellness issues on the agenda for weekly staff meetings.

Along with the successes, Lewis was quick also to point out that she learned some important lessons. Perhaps the most important learning was ensuring that all the appropriate school officials were on board early in the process.

“Sometimes schools don’t make it easy for parents to get involved. We had to learn which hoops to jump through pretty much on our own,” Lewis said. “Even though we had a positive meeting with the superintendent, we should have briefed other key staff as well. Getting everyone on board early would have made our process much more efficient and less stressful.”

Lewis also advised that anyone looking to implement a similar project also should think carefully about how best to engage teachers in the effort.

“In some cases, it’s much better to ask ‘what do you think of this idea?’ rather than saying ‘this is really a good idea.’ This may be just a subtle distinction, but it can make a big difference in how teachers respond to you,” she said. “Each school has its unique culture and you need to understand that upfront.”

Healthy Rewards Also Work in Spotsylvania

Getting off on the right foot with the right folks was an important first step for the nonfood rewards programs in two elementary schools in Spotsylvania County. Nancy Farrell, the local project leader and head of the division’s wellness initiatives, and also a registered dietician, leveraged her combined professional experiences to implement a successful mini-grant project.

Farrell’s first step was to meet with parents to get their help in identifying those schools likely to be most supportive of a nonfood rewards program. These same parents stayed involved throughout the project, ordering and delivering supplies, serving as program liaisons to answer faculty and staff questions and maintaining email communications.

Prior to launching the project, Farrell also met with the school principals and teachers to ask for their support.

“Presenting at the faculty meetings was so important because it gave teachers an opportunity to focus on the issue and offer suggestions,” Farrell said. “Hands flew up everywhere during that first meeting. They were definitely interested and wanted to help.”

Fortunately, enthusiasm for the project continued beyond the faculty meetings. Teachers began replacing candy in their treasure chests with nonfood items ranging from mini-backpacks to toothbrushes donated by the Virginia Department of Health, to pencils and stickers donated by the Southeast United Dairy Industry Association and cookbooks for kids donated by Dole Food Company. Parents also contributed items to the treasure chests.

“We got creative in our search for nonfood rewards,” Farrell said. “We tried to identify items related to wellness and were also interesting to the students. I guess we were successful because the kids rarely asked for candy.”

Farrell used part of the grant to purchase Frisbees that listed 25 healthy snacks and insulated lunch bags for teachers. In addition, the 12 participating teachers each received a \$25 gift card.

“Everyone benefited from the program. Teachers appreciated the resources and the fact that nonfood rewards worked very well. Students liked the trinkets because they lasted longer than a piece of candy,” Farrell said.

Originally intended to run four months, teachers insisted that the program be offered the entire school year. Farrell surveyed the teachers soon after the program launched and also at the end. The following quote reflects the teachers’ enthusiasm.

“I have really enjoyed participating in this program. I feel happy to know that I distributed quality items rather than just handing out candy this year --- it makes me feel like a good role model for my class.” Spotsylvania County Teacher

The *Happy Feet* Morning Walking Program

Imagine the underlying message sent to kids when a teacher requires them to walk laps around the school track as punishment for misbehaving. That actual scenario is what prompted Lisa Bass, a parent and former physical education teacher, to take action and apply for a Virginia Action for Healthy Kids mini-grant.

She used her funds to create a student walking club called *Happy Feet* at Christiansburg Primary School in Montgomery County.

“Our goal was to teach kids that walking is fun and also good for you,” said Bass. “Plus we know that exercise can help get the wiggles out, so kids can concentrate better in class.”

The morning walking club met on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays, 8:25-8:55am, just after students arrived on school grounds and approximately 20 minutes before the bell sounded to begin instructional time. Organized walks were available on days that were dry and over 40° F – roughly 15 weeks during the past school year.

According to Bass, some teachers would take their whole class for a walk and also individual students would walk on their own time during recess or after school. To help keep track of their progress, students submitted activity cards recording their walking times. Every fifth time they participated, students received a certificate and a toe token, a trinket that hangs from the shoe lace. Kids also received stickers, sneaker-shaped erasers, and a bottle of water wrapped with a *Happy Feet* sticker – an especially big hit.

With attendance averaging at 90 students for each walk, five adults were needed each day to help supervise the activity. One volunteer watched students enter and exit the school building and also managed the sign in/out process, while other volunteers walked with the students. Volunteers received a certificate and gift card for every fifth time they helped with the program.

Tips on Implementing Local Wellness Projects

- Select the right schools. Look for schools that are hungry for ways to advance their Wellness Policies.
- Find a cheerleader for your initiative. Identify a strong advocate at the target schools, preferably the principal, a key staff member or teacher.
- Parents can be effective partners. Identify schools that actively support parent involvement as well as PTAs that are genuinely interested in school wellness.
- Take the path of least resistance. To establish early momentum with projects that focus change in the classroom, work with a supportive and enthusiastic teacher.
- Find out what is feasible before launching a project. Talk with parents, teachers and principals for their input and buy-in, then decide whether and how to move forward.
- Set realistic expectations. Implementing a mini-grant program takes more time and effort than you may think, so budget accordingly.
- Incentives work. Teachers respond well to gift cards!

Bass described participation in the school as excellent – 362 out of 483 kids walked at least five times during the program. The second graders were particularly active because they enjoyed the opportunity to talk with their friends as they walked.

“Two things really surprised me – the enthusiasm of the kids and the difficulty of getting parents to volunteer,” said Bass. “At the beginning of the program, six parents helped out but then they stopped coming. Thankfully, the Montgomery County Action for Healthy Kids Team stepped in to help us recruit students from Radford University and Virginia Tech as well as volunteers from a local alternative high school. These younger volunteers were great and the younger kids enjoyed interacting with them.”

Despite sending newsletters and promoting the walking club at PTA meetings, Bass had little success in getting more parents involved in the *Happy Feet* initiative, or even in serving on the school wellness committee.

“Parents seem to support the idea of school wellness but few are willing to volunteer their time,” said Bass. “The good news is that our program was successful and our kids got to see that walking can be fun.”

She added, “In the end we also won over the teachers. The program grew because they saw a well-organized and safe program that benefited classroom instruction. Children also proved to have better behavior when they started school – given the opportunity to ‘run off’ some of their excess energy.”