

A plan for better health

Albright College, Penn State Berks and Reading Hospital collaborate to receive a \$100,000 grant from the Berks County Community Foundation's Community General Hospital Health Care Fund to start a three-year wellness and anti-obesity program for children and parents.

BY JASON BRUDERECK READING EAGLE

AGROUP of health-care workers and academics came up with a plan after a 2006 study found that Berks County residents tend to be heavier, more sedentary and at increased risk of diabetes than residents of other nearby counties.

The report — commissioned by the Berks County Community Foundation and conducted by the West Chester University School of Business and Public Affairs — found 39 percent of county residents admitted being overweight or obese.

As a result of the study, Albright College, Penn State Berks and Reading Hospital collaborated to receive a \$100,000 grant from the foundation's Community General Hospital Health Care Fund to start a three-year wellness and anti-obesity program.

The program ran for five 10-week sessions with a dif-Wesner.

Unfortunately, local school districts have so far shown less interest in the information.

After the three-year program, which was dubbed "A Wellness Adventure," and the grant were finished, course material was compiled and all 18 Berks County public school districts were invited to a session in March to receive the material and an overview of ferent dozen or so students each time from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade at 13th and Union Elementary School, Holy Guardian Angels School and the Albright Early Learning Center.

From various instructors, the students and their parents learned fun and inexpensive ways to exercise and eat well.

"The parents really wanted the information," said project coordinator Samantha how to use it, said Wesner, who is also an assistant dean of students and director of the Gable Health Center at Albright College.

But only four districts — Conrad Weiser, Muhlenberg, Oley Valley and Reading — sent representatives to the presentation.

"We're hoping the lesson plans we provided will be used, and we felt it was important to present those to the schools to put them in context with what we did," Wesner said.

Nonetheless, area school officials interested in receiving the material can still get it from Albright, said college spokeswoman Jennifer Post Stoudt.

"Our hope is the schools expand on it," Wesner said. "It was our opportunity to turn over something great to the schools in the community."

The material is in lessonplan format designed to conform with educational standards, said Peggy Place, instructor of education at Albright.

"It's been three years in the making, and it's something we're really proud of," Place said.

Children were taught about appropriate portion sizes, food groups and the nutrients associated with those groups, said Jill Zelinsky, a registered dietitian and assistant director of Reading Hospital's nutrition department.

"Their exposure to common foods was not as extensive as we would have thought," she said. "One child had never tasted broccoli and didn't even know what it was."

But the children were enthused about trying new foods.

"The kids were pretty adventuresome and willing," Zelinsky said. "If they didn't like an item, we talked about other choices in those food groups."

The nutrition instructors — hospital dietitians Christine Bucher and Mallory Reed — also impressed on the students that

everything that enters their bodies has a critical influence on their growth and development.

"That means something to children when you're talking about getting taller, growing muscles, their ability to see well, heal cuts and have the energy to play," Zelinsky said. "They really, positively embraced the information and were enthusiastic about working with their parents to try some of these new foods at home."

Parents were taken on a tour of a grocery store and taught to read and interpret food nutrition labels.

"We showed them how they could use that to guide their purchasing practices," she said.

College students who helped with the program were surprised by some of the children's eating behaviors and preference for unhealthy snack foods, Place said.

"It's easy to eat chips or eat things from bags, but it's just as easy to make trail mix and have it available," Place said.

By the end of the program, children had broader tastes, and parents knew how to accommodate them, Place said.

"You can make better food choices economically and easily," she said.

Both children and parents learned creative ways to move around more, said Helen A. Hartman, senior lecturer of kinesiology at Penn State Berks.

"We did 30 minutes each week of teaching different ways of being active in ways other than what's referred to as exercising," she said. "I tried to avoid the term exercise because children don't exercise; they move."

"I didn't want them to feel they had to spend each day doing a regimen of jumping jacks, crunches and pushups because that's the connotation usually given to the word exercise. We emphasized that movement is an everyday lifestyle choice."

"We talked about being active 60 minutes a day, and we used pedometers to give an idea of how much movement they did in short periods."

"The more comfortable they are moving, the more they'll continue moving as an adult."

Fun ways to move included activities associated with countries, she said.

When the students "visited" the Caribbean, they pretended to scuba dive, wiggled like fish and walked like crabs.

For Mexico, they did the Mexican hat dance and maneuvered like they had capes to fight bulls.

"I've been running into more parents who don't know how to be active with their children," Hartman said. "The parents have to be involved."

Lifestyle changes are easy to make, especially in small steps, Zelinsky said.

"None of this has to be a complete 180-degree turn," she said."

Contact Jason Brudereck: 610-371-5044 or jbrudereck@readingeagle.com.



COURTESY OF ALBRIGHT COLLEGE Participants take part in
• A Wellness Adventure.

•



COURTESY OF ALBRIGHT COLLEGE Participants take part in

- A Wellness Adventure.