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How Spokane Public School's Nutrition Services is Tackling the Childhood Obesity Issue

by Blythe Thimsen



EVERYBODY LOVES A chubby baby. Those ample thighs, soft squishy tummy and chubby fists make them as cute as can be. Fast forward a few years and that baby fat is not so cute; especially when it is on an obese child.

According to the National Institute of Health, "the number of children who are overweight has doubled in the last two to three decades; currently one child in five is overweight."

Along with those extra pounds come problems. Overweight children are increasingly susceptible to diseases which could be prevented. Type 2 diabetes is commonly referred to as adult-onset diabetes because it traditionally strikes adults; however, it is now becoming a common disease in over-

weight children. Additionally, children who are overweight, especially those that are obese, have an increased risk of developing heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or having a stroke. All that is lot for a young child's body to bear.

It is not difficult to figure out some of the roots of this problem. Turn on the television and you are bombarded with ads for all sorts of nutritionally-void, calorie-laden foods marketed toward young children. That television that you turned on to see the ads may be one of the biggest culprits in the problem. Kids today spend less time outside chasing balls, dogs and each other, and more time in sedentary activities such as watching TV, playing video games and putting in face time with a computer. Additionally, the busy schedules of families

today make grabbing meals on the go, such as fast food, an easy alternative to a nutritious sit-down family dinner.

While the responsibility for children's nutrition and health belongs to parents, many school districts nationwide have started implementing changes that foster healthier lifestyles. Spokane Public School's District 81 is ahead of the curve.

"Our schools have been doing a fairly good job of working on it (nutritional changes) for a long time," says Douglas Wordell, Nutrition Services Director for Spokane Public Schools. "We're not in sales, though, so we don't push it in the forefront."

In an attempt to get schools on track, Washington Senate Bill 5436 required all school districts to develop fitness and nutrition procedures and policies. For District 81, much of that was already in the works. "We saw what we were doing matched what was coming down the pike," says Wordell of the district's plans which were already in motion. Whole grain bread items, more fruits and vegetables, and selecting foods with lower sugar, fat and salt content are all steps District 81 has taken to ensure their foods are nutritious.

The district also developed a health advisory task force which looked at fitness, health, nutrition and classroom activity levels. "If the big issue is obesity, then you need to look at excessive calories, bigger portions and lack of activity," says Wordell.

One specific step the district has made is the elimination of sugary beverages sold on all school grounds during school hours. In place of those once covered soda machines, students can now purchase 100% fruit juice, water, flavored water, milk and diet sodas. Why the diet soda? "If it is a calorie issue, diet sodas are a reasonable choice," says Wordell of the calorie-free drinks. Although the nutritional value is not high, neither is the calorie count.

Removing the sodas was not just difficult for the students to get used to, but the schools felt the withdrawals themselves. The schools lost 50 percent of the revenues from vending machines and student stores, which are used to finance a variety of student programs, including clubs, ASB (the student government) and referees for sports programs. "You cut off your nose to spite your face," says Wordell. "A lot of those extras that keep kids healthy (sports and activities) are funded by sales." Although there were revenues from the available beverages, sales for the more nutritious beverages

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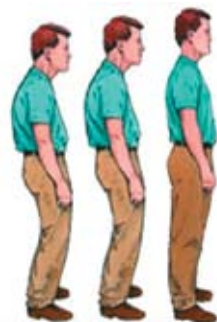
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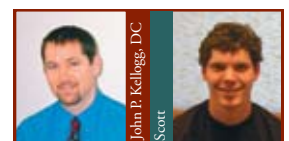
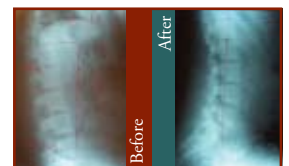


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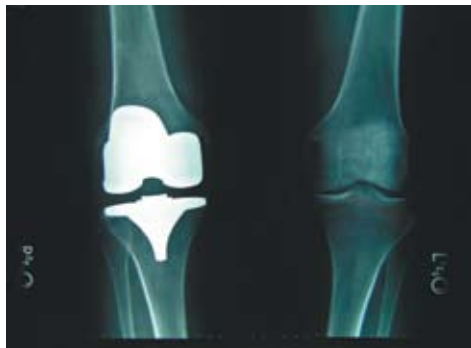
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ages were down last year compared to years before when sugary drinks were sold.

Another change in the schools can be seen in the cafeteria. "We're trying to reach out and provide foods kids like," says Wordell. Some of those changes include offering fresh fruits and vegetables and take-n-go salads. "We've noticed as kids get to choose, it's more likely they will eat it. We live in a culture of choice."

By teaching kids to make the right choice when it comes to food, and then providing nutritious options, the district is helping lay a foundation of good health in students. The goal for Wordell and those who work in the nutrition services department is to find nutritious food and a healthy balance of meals that students will eat. "We are not in the business of feeding garbage cans," says Wordell. He wants to make sure the foods they choose to serve end up in student's stomachs rather than the kitchen trash.

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Promoting fruits and vegetables and demonstrating portion control are two more ways the district is helping students.

Shaw Middle School, a District 81 school, received a \$70,000 fruit and vegetable grant this last year, which allows the delivery of fresh fruits and vegetables to the school and the classrooms everyday. Any student, regardless of whether or not they participate in the reduced lunch program is welcome to the food. Bowls of fresh produce are delivered to classrooms each morning. If a student is hungry and would like a snack, they are welcome to help themselves to a piece of fruit whenever they like. They are encouraged to eat the healthy treats.

Wordell says that the high schools that receive the eighth graders from Shaw noticed an increase in the amount of healthy foods they eat, and are often not able to keep up with the demand. By learning to like the food, the students have established healthy eating habits.

Another way District 81 is working to introduce students to fruits and vegetables and to create healthy eating habits at an early age is by working towards by having a fruit and vegetable bar (much like salad bar) in every elementary school cafeteria. The goal is to have these available and to get students to develop healthy habits as

early as possible.

Wordell and his team are responsible for coordinating the meals to serve lunch to over 16,000 students. They also serve 5,000 students breakfast and 2,000 students with after school snacks. They understand variety is an important key in food services. There are usually two options for an entrée during the day, as well as a fast bag, which is a pre-made lunch bag packed with nutritious choices like uncrusted peanut butter and jelly, yogurt, low-fat cheese sticks and graham crackers.

"Balancing nutrition, customer preference and budget, it is so hard," says Wordell. Some choices come at an expense. For example, District 81 recently switched to whole wheat hamburger buns, which provide more nutritional value; however, they come at nearly twice the price of regular buns. It is a trade off between price and nutrition. "We want to be good stewards of our money," he says.

Teaching students that food can be fun helps them learn to respect it. "We try to have fun with the food," says Wordell. On Valentine's Day students dined on heart shaped chicken nuggets. Wordell admits chicken nuggets are not the most nutritious food, but he realizes it is okay to have them once in a while, as part of a balanced meal. Dessert is something else students get once in a while. As part of their mandated policy, District 81 decided that dessert would be offered, but not more than twice a week. This allows students to enjoy a special treat, but not to go overboard. It also helps them understand that all foods can be incorporated into their lives at some point, as long as they do so in moderation.

"There is a balance; there are no good or bad foods," says Wordell. This idea helps teach students that healthy eating is about making good choices, balancing the types of food and eating proper portions.

"Eat right, play more" is the motto of the food services at District 81. "It is about better portions, sitting down to eat meals, enjoying family time, limiting snacking, and your physical activity has to be something you enjoy," says Wordell.

Although nutritious school lunches are just one piece in the puzzle of how to fight childhood obesity, it is an important one. As schools continue to educate students and give them first hand experience with nutritious food choices, they are helping prepare a foundation upon which these children can build a healthy and obesity free future. **S**

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