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## Royal Oak Doctor on Mission to Help Families Make Healthier Choices

**Pilot program aims to fight childhood obesity through grocery store tours, school nutrition classes, and health screenings**

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**BY JASMINE ESPY // PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE AND CHRIS GERARD**

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**O**n a recent Tuesday at Keller Elementary in Royal Oak, Wayne State University dietetics student Daniele Blunk steps to the front of the fifth-grade class to recap last week's nutrition lesson.



Students shout out answers and enthusiastically share the new foods they've tried. Blunk breaks down vital minerals, fruits, and proteins their young bodies need to grow.

While excitement was already high, students' eyes light up when they learn fruit smoothies are on the menu for the day.

Annabelle Flora says when having to choose between the triple berry and dark chocolate banana smoothie, she hopes to bring the triple berry recipe home.

"I thought it was really cool — we get to try new things every week," Annabelle says. "Last week we tried kefir [fermented milk drink] and today we got to try healthy smoothies."

The nutrition class is a part of Healthy Town Everywhere, a program launched last year by Dr. Paul Ehrmann to help families make healthier choices. Starting with grocery store tours, the program expanded to include nutrition education classes at schools such as Keller and Northwood Elementary, with more planned. The program is based on three fundamental pillars of preventive health: nutrition, fitness, and lifestyle behavior. Every other month last year after launching, Ehrmann and his team, including students from the Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine and the WSU Coordinated Program in Dietetics, offered free body measurements, as well as blood sugar and blood pressure testing, to families during grocery store tours at Royal Oak's Holiday Market. He's also working with the Royal Oak Chamber of Commerce, Oakland County Health Department, and Royal Oak Public Schools.

"This is where customers can come in and set up a free one-on-one personal shopping experience with a dietitian," says Blunk, who also shares handouts with diabetes, low-sodium, or heart-healthy guidelines.

This year, he hopes to incorporate more physical fitness as well by partnering with the group Walk with a Doc starting this spring and continuing through October.

Ehrmann, a family physician for the past 35 years, has focused his practice on preventive health care. He started taking a special interest in childhood obesity after he heard a startling statistic in the early 2000s: The generation of kids at the time may not outlive their parents due to childhood obesity. In 2008, he wrote a book: Generation XL: The Childhood Obesity Pandemic - A Community-Based Solution.

According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, the percentage of U.S. children who are obese has more than tripled since the 1970s; today, about one in five children ages 6-19 is obese.

“It’s really the family that’s the most important thing as it relates to the kids,” Ehrmann says, adding that the kids can have all these great things they come home with from school, but if the parents aren’t engaged, nothing is going to happen.

Marcie Dryden, principal of Keller Elementary, says the school implemented the program in Michelle Daane’s classroom after Ehrmann expressed he was looking for a place to pilot Healthy Town Everywhere. She says these lessons are vital because they do not currently have curriculum tailored toward teaching students about nutrition.

“Fifth grade is a good age to teach nutritional values,” Dryden says. “They will start making their own food choices soon, [and] by middle school they will know how to read labels to know what they’re putting in their bodies.”

At the closing of the program, students go on a field trip to Holiday Market to put their new knowledge to the test in a grocery store tour.

While not all of the students in the program have changed their diets, Daane says she has seen some of the kids make healthier choices.

It’s “not just teaching them food facts,” Daane says. “They’re introduced to complex information and the kids are excited when [Daniele] comes each week and they get to try new foods. It has made students aware. I have seen some positive changes in their eating selections.”

Ehrmann began the program in Royal Oak, where he is based, and would like to see it grow by building models in other communities. This month, he has a grocery store tour planned in Midtown.

“The whole idea is to expand it out and offer doctors a blueprint so they can do it in their communities,” he says.

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**For more information about Healthy Town Everywhere, visit [docpaul.com](http://docpaul.com).**

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