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Parents and kids learn about nutrition from the Children's Health Initiative Program

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Marsha Tate has a trick for every time her son Marlon comes home declaring he's thirsty.

Instead of just giving him the Gatorade he craves, she offers a trade: Thirty minutes on the treadmill in exchange for half a bottle of the sports drink. And, she says, he must supplement the Gatorade with a glass of water.

It's all to promote healthy living, something Tate is learning a lot about at McIntyre Elementary School in Southfield and something many Michigan parents are concerned about as childhood obesity continues to rise.

Tate's son is a fourth-grader at McIntyre and they're among more than 30 parents and kids who are spending five weeks learning about nutrition and physical fitness thanks to the Children's Health Initiative Program.

"It's given me a lot of great tips about how to get the right foods in his diet," said Tate of Lathrup Village.

The program was created by Dr. Paul Ehrmann, a Royal Oak family practice physician who regularly sees the impact of poor food choices and inactivity in his patients. Ehrmann decided the best way to help was by bringing experts directly to parents and kids in school.

"This is a 365-day issue. We want to give them some tools to take that information forward and apply it to their lives," Ehrmann said.

Changes at school

The program is an example of growing efforts to combat childhood obesity. By July, schools nationwide must have adopted a wellness policy. Many already are trying to change school culture by offering more fruits and vegetables and cutting back on junk food in the cafeteria and the classroom.

People like Ehrmann are discouraged by statistics that show the number of obese children soared from 11% in 1988-94 to 16% in 1999-2002.

"This is a worldwide epidemic. We're going to have children not outliving their parents if we don't do something," Ehrmann said.

He hopes to expand his program so doctors elsewhere can use it in their communities. Last year's pilot program at Oakland Elementary School in Royal Oak had positive results. Ehrmann found that after 180 days, many children had made improvements in areas he believes are key.

The percentage of kids who remained active -- exercising 20 minutes a day -- increased from 14% before the program began to 48% 180 days after it ended. The percentage who ate breakfast every day rose from 23% to 64% in the same time period.

In the state Legislature, a Healthy Kids Task Force is trying to get a handle on just how serious the problem is in Michigan. That group is led by Rep. Leslie Mortimer, R-Horton, who was a registered dietician for more than two decades.

"If we teach children, they will learn from an early age what they need to be healthy. It's a lot more difficult to change once they become adults," Mortimer said.

Ehrmann testified at one of five hearings Mortimer held this year -- attempts to determine what types of programs exist to fight childhood obesity. The task force is to issue a report in August, with recommendations on legislative solutions, Mortimer said.

Expert advice

Ehrmann's solution came in the form of the five-week program, which has brought in experts in fitness and food to teach participants quick exercises to stay active and ways to eat right.

Last week, Annabel Cohen, a free-lance food writer and former caterer, taught the children and parents how to make healthy, affordable meals. Cohen pays particular attention to developing recipes for the kids that they'll love to make and eat.

"I think about what kids will eat and what they won't eat. You can do all the broccoli soufflis in the world, but it's not what kids like to eat."

What they liked the most last week were Cohen's recipes for oven-fried chicken tenders and whole-wheat pasta with broccoli, ricotta and creamy tomato sauce.

Cohen cooked, with assistance from a few students, while Bridget MacDonald, a registered dietitian, gave quick lessons on things such as removing skin from chicken, washing cutting boards and not cooking vegetables too long.

Parents and students participating in the program come from McIntyre Elementary and nearby Leonhard Elementary School.

McIntyre already had a Walking Wednesdays program, which had students and staff walking around the building several times "to build up strength and stamina," principal Greg Kubasiewicz said.

Kubasiewicz and social worker Evva Hepner were concerned about what they saw during those Wednesday sessions.

"A lot of the kids tired easily," Kubasiewicz said, adding that is why he was eager to bring Ehrmann and his program to the school.

Kubasiewicz said the program has been so successful he wants to do another round, with different participants.

Among the converts was Marlon Tate, the McIntyre fourth-grader. His mother stresses the importance of being physically fit often to Marlon, who dreams of playing basketball professionally. Among the biggest lessons he's learned?

"You should exercise more often, so you can keep moving and don't get lazy," Marlon said.

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