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RIVERDALE - YMCA teaches kids about healthy eating

(by Leslie Scott - Staff Writer - February 11, 2009)

RIVERDALE - Students attending the YMCA afterschool program have been getting a wealth of information on how to stay healthy recently.

The Horizon Foundation for New Jersey has partnered with the New Jersey YMCA State Alliance to launch an enhanced afterschool program designed to fight childhood obesity.

Amelia Griffiths, YMCA child care program director, said the YMCA has held an afterschool program, called CATCH (Coordinated Approach to Child Health), for the past 11 years at Riverdale School.

"Our afterschool curriculum is a physical activity, snack time and we do academic or recreation projects," said Griffiths.

According to the Foundation, the CATCH curriculum is a national award-winning program with more than 15 years of research documenting its success in reducing the rate of childhood obesity.

Through the partnership with the Foundation, CATCH has been expanded with a new program called Healthy U so it now includes a nutritional component and enhanced physical activities.

"Healthy U is basically a three-prong program. We have the physical activity, strong parental encouragement at home to promote self esteem and healthy living, and you have nutritional education and that is what Healthy U is about," said Daniel Emmer, public relations manager with Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey.

To accomplish this, the Foundation awarded a \$1 million grant over a four-year period for the program.

"The ultimate goal of the program is not just to expand it to more children but to have every kid participating in Healthy U to lose 10 percent of their body weight," said Emmer.

There are 30 students registered in the afterschool program at the school.

Five-year-old Alexa Ford said she likes when she gets to run around the most because it gives her more energy.

Seven-year-old John Taniz has been going to the afterschool program for the past three years. He said he also enjoys running around outside and he also likes eating all the healthy food that is available to them.

Although the kids from Riverdale all look fit and healthy, Emmer explained that they will always remember all the things they experience through Healthy U.

Every student that is in the YMCA afterschool program in the state can participate in Healthy U.

Emmer said that Healthy U is the first statewide childhood obesity program.

"Right now this is year one and we only have 18,000 kids, but we hope to increase that over the next four years," Emmer said.

According to the Foundation, statistics show that almost one-third of all children ages six through 19 are considered overweight or at risk for being overweight. Obesity-associated hospital costs for children have tripled over the past 20 years, and obesity is associated with diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, depression, breast cancer and arthritis.

Anyone interested in getting a child involved in the program can contact Griffiths at 201-955-5300.

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