

Afterschool and Childhood Obesity:

# Three Case Studies

## **COMBATING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS**

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS, THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL  
AND THE HEALTHY BEHAVIORS INITIATIVE:  
THREE CASE STUDIES

**Andria J. Fletcher, PhD**

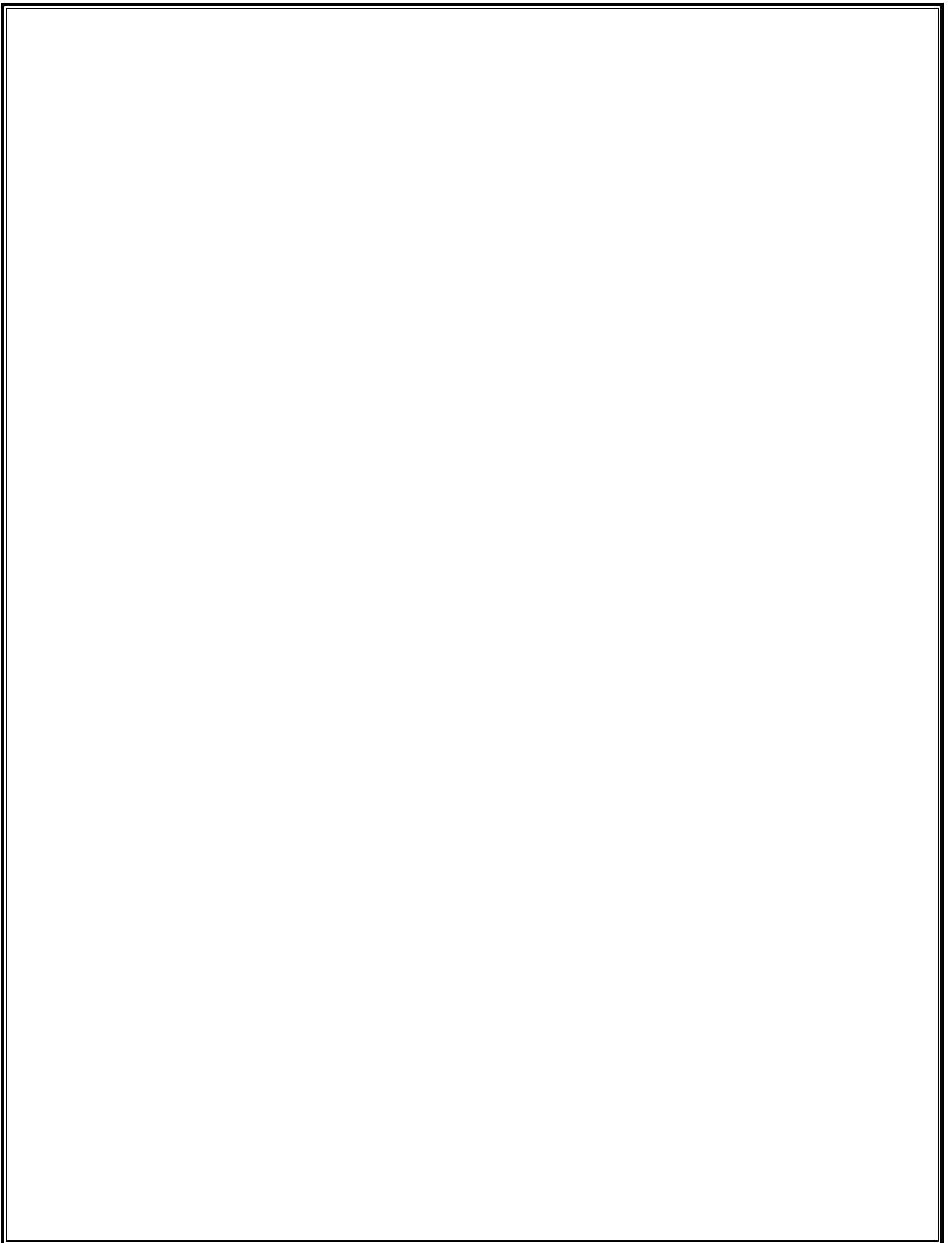
A WORLD FIT FOR KIDS!  
Inner City, Los Angeles

CLUB Y.E.S. MADERA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION  
Rural Central Valley

THE YMCA OF SILICON VALLEY  
Metropolitan San Jose



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## COMBATING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS

### AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS, THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL AND THE HEALTHY BEHAVIORS INITIATIVE: THREE CASE STUDIES

Andria J. Fletcher, PhD

Among the millions of children and young people in our communities, poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyles cause serious health issues, lower self-esteem, lead to social and psychological problems and contribute to poor academic performance. Overweight is the most common health problem facing children today, and it has reached epidemic proportions. It ranks as the public's #1 concern for children in the United States, ahead of drugs, alcohol and gangs, and is the focus of First Lady Michelle Obama's recently announced *Let's Move!* campaign.

Although childhood obesity crosses all socioeconomic lines, children living in poverty are disproportionately affected. It is all too common for families with limited financial resources to sacrifice the quality of food for quantity and to consume large amounts of food when it is available to compensate for times when it is not. Easy access to high concentrations of fast food chains and corner markets compounds the problem. And, unsafe neighborhoods make it difficult, if not impossible, for children to get the exercise they need to be healthy. All of this contributes to the likelihood that they will become overweight.

If these patterns continue into adulthood, one in every three children born in 2000 and one in every two children of color is likely to develop type 2 diabetes in his or her lifetime. This, and other medical issues, will lead to an unprecedented rate of premature death and disability, diminished workplace productivity and staggering financial repercussions for families, insurers, healthcare providers and our society.

As devastating as this is, we know that children who develop healthy eating habits and are physically active at an early age are much more likely to be well and stay well. We also know that barriers to this happening are shared among

the community as a whole – and that when these barriers are lowered or removed, changes in individual behavior become more achievable and sustainable. The socio-ecological model makes a compelling case that the most effective route to healthy behaviors comes through a combination of efforts at all levels – individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and public policy.

There is a growing body of evidence that comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to be a driving force in this effort. Through a combination of federal, state and local funding, these programs already reach almost a million low-income children in California and many more across the nation. Building on this platform makes sense. It can be done at minimal cost to taxpayers and pay huge dividends.

***Comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to combat childhood obesity in ways that are fiscally prudent, socially responsible and politically appealing.***

California's Healthy Behaviors Initiative offers a prime example of how this can happen. Funded by the *Network for a Healthy California* (a division of the California Department of Public Health), the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and The California Endowment, the Center for Collaborative Solutions has spent the last five years developing exemplary practices in nutrition and physical activity, vetting them with experts and field testing them in 10 multi-site afterschool programs serving over 75,000 elementary and middle school students. Located in inner cities, metropolitan areas and rural communities throughout the state, these programs now offer regional Healthy Behaviors Learning Centers and provide support to many other programs. Three of these programs are included in these case studies. They offer

examples of the approaches that are being used, the changes that are taking place in children's eating habits and physical fitness levels, and the

impact that this initiative is capable of having throughout the United States.

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## **A WORLD FIT FOR KIDS! Inner City, Los Angeles**

Over the past 16 years, A World Fit For Kids! (WFIT) has provided health-enhancing opportunities for more than 150,000 children and young people in some of the most economically challenged inner city neighborhoods in Los Angeles. With the

elimination of nutrition and physical education in many schools, the program has filled the gap by taking a strategic approach that is changing students' eating habits, improving their physical fitness levels and surrounding them with positive environmental support systems.

### **Promoting Positive Individual Behaviors**

Like most high quality afterschool programs, WFIT offers a wide variety of academic and enrichment activities that are exciting, engaging and appropriately challenging to students. What distinguishes this program is its powerful vision and high level of intentionality. Each program component is designed with a specific purpose in mind: helping youngsters become healthy, fit and ready to learn.

Children regularly participate in nutrition education classes and learn about the Food Pyramid and the importance of healthy eating habits. They apply what they learn in cooking classes, where they have access to mobile kitchens and develop healthy recipes. They visit local grocery stores and learn how to read labels and comparison shop for the highest nutritional quality and best prices. They take field trips to farmers' markets and try new fruits and vegetables. And, they set personal nutrition goals and record their progress in daily journals. These experiences reinforce what children are learning and make it easier for them to make better choices about the foods they eat and the beverages they drink. As evidenced in recent evaluations, the level of intentionality demonstrated in this program is paying off:

- Soft drink consumption has dramatically declined. At the Norwood Healthy Behaviors Learning Center, the number of students who regularly drank three or

more sodas a day fell to just three percent.

- At Norwood, close to three-quarters of those attending reported drinking water three or more times a day during the spring of 2009, compared with 60 percent in the fall of 2008.
- Kids increasingly chose fruits and vegetables over chips and fast food, with the majority reporting an increase in their preference for healthy foods.

WFIT approaches its efforts to improve youngsters' physical fitness with the same intentionality. Students engage in at least 40 minutes of moderate to strenuous physical activity every day in a variety of traditional and nontraditional sports, dance classes, circuit training, rock wall climbing, exercises and yoga. They are given pedometers and trained in how to track their fun, formal and functional walking both in the program and at home. And, they learn how to monitor their heart rates. Although California only mandates physical fitness testing for 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, WFIT monitors student progress from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The results are well-documented and impressive.

- Ninety percent of all students reported that the program helped them become more physically active.

- Sixty percent of all 5th grade students passed the state mandated Fitnessgram test (which sets standards in aerobic capacity, body composition, abdominal strength, trunk extensor strength, upper body strength and flexibility) during the 2008–2009 school year, as compared to 51 percent in 2007–2008 and 36 percent in 2006–2007.
- Students who were in the healthy fitness zone for abdominal strength in the fall of 2008 increased from 28 percent to 74 percent in the spring of 2009.
- Eight out of ten children increased the number of laps they were able to complete and decreased the time it took them to run a mile by at least one full minute.
- Half of all students lowered their Body Mass Index, with overweight children losing an average of five pounds.

WFIT’s approach not only improves children’s health and well-being, it has an added bonus that directly contributes to their success in school. Students were absent less often, and their academic performance improved more than expected. Those who regularly attended the program raised their standardized test scores in math, and eight out of ten reported improvement in their grades.

High school students who worked in the program were more likely to pass the math exit exam test (CAHSEE) than their peers, and 94 percent who participated in the Teen Fit for Success<sup>SM</sup> training and internship program graduated from high school, primarily from a high school with a 49.5 percent graduation rate. In recognition of the difference it is making, WFIT received the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Gold Medal Award, presented by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

### Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships

Beyond the opportunities WFIT provides for individual students, the program recognizes the importance of surrounding children with positive role models. The organization makes sure that job applicants are aware of the program’s commitment to everyone’s health and well-being, its zero tolerance policy for unhealthy food on its campuses and its determination to help children overcome the challenges they face. Only those candidates who enthusiastically support the program’s goals and policies are hired.

The program’s approach to staff development reflects the same values. Each staff member participates in ongoing nutrition and physical activity training and is familiar with the exemplary practices developed in the Healthy Behaviors Initiative. The nutrition director, a full-time member of the leadership team, trains staff to ensure that they have an appropriate knowledge base for the activities they offer and the approaches they take when working with children. Goals are set, weekly action plans are developed and progress is measured quarterly.

Coaches (those working directly with students) who oversee physical activities receive intensive and ongoing training delivered through WFIT’s *Mentors in Motion<sup>SM</sup>*, helping them gain new insights and perspectives about planning and facilitating quality physical activity sessions for students. The approach integrates opportunities

***To improve their own health and well-being, staff members are given stipends to offset the cost of joining health and fitness clubs, and each employee has the opportunity to work with a personal fitness trainer and nutrition counselor.***

for self-empowerment, leadership and experiential learning and creates powerful results for students and the teens and adults who work with them. Every staff member has access to program-wide and site-based coaching to ensure that they are able to transfer what they learn into real-life settings. And, they have the opportunity to work with experts to develop personal nutrition and fitness plans of their own.

As WFIT has become more intentional about surrounding students with positive interpersonal influences during the afterschool hours, the staff has also become more sensitive to the issues children face at home. They are keenly aware of the importance of parents as partners in children's efforts to become healthier. Families participate in nutrition education classes and are encouraged to become more physically active. Parent newsletters are sent home periodically, and include sections on nutrition (including recipes for preparing healthy meals) and physical activity.

In addition, families are made aware of a variety of resources, including the Food Stamp Program and local food banks – a critical factor in improving their food security (having enough to eat). As a result, they report that they are making better choices about the meals they cook at home. They are preparing meals in healthier ways. And, they are acquiring the knowledge they need to select healthy foods and beverages that are within their budgets.

### **Promoting Positive Organizational Environments**

WFIT recognizes the importance of developing authentic partnerships with schools. A number of program coaches are instructional assistants during the school day. In one case, a physical education teacher is also the primary physical activity coach/trainer for the afterschool staff. This ensures alignment between WFIT and the schools where its programs are located and positions the program to influence school policies and environments.

***Positive relationships with certificated and classified staff, including food service managers and parent outreach directors, have made it possible to create and sustain healthier school environments.***

Through WFIT's outreach strategies, more students are taking advantage of the school-based free and reduced price breakfast and lunch programs.

The messages they are receiving before, during and afterschool are increasingly consistent. And largely through the leadership team's efforts, schools that had fallen behind on their timetables have moved forward at a faster rate in implementing their Wellness Plans and have included the afterschool program in their strategies.

### **Promoting Positive Community Environments**

WFIT goes beyond the role most afterschool programs play by collaborating with schools and community agencies to coordinate efforts to bring about change. The program recognizes that what happens just beyond the immediate campus is part of the environment that either supports or detracts from what it is trying to accomplish. Until recently, vendors selling candy, chips, ice cream and sodas positioned their carts outside entrances 15 minutes before the end of the school day. By working in partnership with principals, the staff has been successful in enforcing local ordinances that prohibit vendors from being closer than 300 feet from schools. While this hasn't eliminated the problem, it has greatly reduced it.

Working with a variety of local organizations to maximize the use of available resources has also become a high priority. The Salvation Army Los Angeles Red Shield Youth and Community Center offers access to its recreational facilities for trainings and encourages staff, students and families who live in the vicinity to take advantage of the opportunity for evening and weekend physical activity at little or no cost. Through a partnership with the local food bank, children have access to more fruits and vegetables during the program, and their parents are taking advantage of this service as well.

Connecting students with professional sports teams has also played an important role in reinforcing the importance of being physically

fit and nutritionally smart. The Clippers (basketball), Kings (ice hockey), Dodgers (baseball), Sparks (women's basketball), Riptide (Lacrosse) and the University of Southern California Athletic Department donate tickets to professional sports events and provide access to equipment.

***Support from professional sports teams and high profile corporations reinforces the importance of physical activity.***

### **Promoting Positive Policy Changes**

WFIT's executive director, Normandie Nigh, is a nationally recognized expert in physical fitness and afterschool program development and an international speaker and trainer. She has been the executive director of the program since 1994. She serves on numerous local, state and national advisory boards and regularly advocates for changes in public policy that remove barriers and support healthy life-styles, both in Sacramento and Washington, DC. And, in addition to briefing Congressional members and Senators, she recently participated in a White House Executive Staff meeting advocating for changes in federal policy.

WFIT student appeared before the Institute of Medicine's Standing Committee on Childhood Obesity Prevention. And, MTV aired a documentary focusing on combating the childhood obesity crisis and highlighting the exceptional work the program is doing, bringing greater attention to the issue, raising its visibility and making it real to decision makers at all levels.

***National and international television personality Kevin Sorbo is the program's national spokesperson and a leading advocate for children's health and well-being.***

As part of its teen outreach program, a former

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### **CLUB Y.E.S. MADERA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION Rural Central Valley**

Over the past ten years, the Madera County Office of Education has responded to the need for comprehensive afterschool programs in rural Central California by quadrupling program services in low-income communities, bringing \$21 million in state and federal dollars into the county and providing life-changing opportunities for 19,000 children and their

families – 80 percent of whom live below the poverty line and many of whom are migrant farm workers. By embedding nutrition and physical activity in everything it does, from staff development to creating exciting and innovative approaches to learning to partnering with parents and schools, the program has achieved remarkable results.

### **Promoting Positive Individual Behaviors**

Club Y.E.S. doesn't just provide activities for students, it creates a culture that fosters youth development, changes children's eating habits and increases their enthusiasm for physical activity. Students spend 30 to 40 minutes a day in moderate to strenuous physical activities that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive for their families, including tennis; dance clubs;

bicycling; mobile rock climbing; Wii Sports; Dance, Dance Revolution (DDR); SPARK and fit-sticks. Through smart investments, every site has a mobile kitchen and will have a fully operational greenhouse by the end of the year.

Under close staff supervision, students build their upper and lower body strength and develop

their muscles by rotating through six different sets of exercise equipment in on-site mini-gyms. They improve their coordination, balance and agility on mini-trampolines. They increase their endurance and aerobic capacity by running laps. And, they take monthly field trips that expose them to outdoor adventures, including ropes courses, laser tag and roller skating.

Beyond structured physical activities, Club Y.E.S. creatively integrates movement into all of its academic and enrichment program components. Younger students learn site words and improve their vocabularies through the use of play cubes. Older students strengthen their math skills through competitions that include relay races. And this year the program will hold its first annual triathlon, which includes academic events, biking and running.

***By taking a project-based approach, children become increasingly responsible for their own learning and empowered to make changes in their own lives.***

As a way to help students make daily physical activity a way of life, a portion of the program's budget goes toward purchasing pedometers for every child so that they can monitor their activity both in and out the program. Students establish personal goals, track their daily activity and measure their progress. They stay motivated and engaged by taking part in grade-level challenges and celebrations of their improvement every Friday.

### **Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships**

Club Y.E.S. approaches staff development strategically with the goal that every employee will become a positive role model. The program director and leadership team work closely with other Madera County Office of Education staff to design, develop and implement training in nutrition and physical activity. Hands-on workshops for program leaders (those who work directly with children) emphasize content and approaches that can be immediately applied in their work. Movement is integrated into training in ways that help staff members increase their

Students have learned what's healthy and what's not, and they apply what they've learned in their everyday lives. Youngsters who used to ask for cookies, candy and soft drinks as incentives and for holiday celebrations now request fruits, vegetables, juice and water. They know the importance of good nutrition, not just because they've been taught it in classes but because what they learn through the Healthy Lifestyle Choices curriculum and Harvest of the Month materials becomes personal, meaningful and relevant in their cooking and gardening classes.

One of the practices that sets Club Y.E.S. apart from a lot of other programs is its innovative approach to expanding students' knowledge, increasing their excitement about learning and helping them master new skills. Among the many examples, one stands out. Each year students spend several months engaged in project-based learning. This year, the subject is whether King Tutankhamen was killed or died accidentally. Students conduct research on the internet and in magazines, including National Geographic. They learn about ancient Egyptian history and culture, including farming practices, canal systems, food preferences and sports, and compare and contrast these with those they are familiar with in their own environments. As they uncover clues, test hypotheses and do investigative reporting, every child takes on greater responsibility for his or her own learning and is empowered to take control of his or her own life.

enthusiasm for physical activity and connect it with their personal health and well-being. The program's policy of replacing soft drinks with water, and candy with fresh fruits and vegetables during staff meetings and program hours reinforces positive messages.

Staff members are trained in understanding connections between healthy behaviors and medical problems, and are knowledgeable about the symptoms of childhood diabetes (which is increasingly prevalent among upper elementary

and middle school students). They know what to do in an emergency if a child has an asthma attack or allergic reaction to particular foods. They pay close attention to keeping youngsters' medical records and contact information up to date by staying in regular communication with parents and family members. And, when symptoms that may suggest Type 2 diabetes or other health problems appear, they immediately notify healthcare consultants.

The impact of the program's presence in the Central Valley extends to families in other ways as well. By offering programs free of charge, Club Y.E.S. has saved families more than \$7 million in childcare costs and made it possible for many single parents, and especially women, to enter and remain in the workforce. This has made a real difference for them and for two-parent working families who are struggling to make financial ends meet.

***As families have become more financially self-sufficient, their food security has improved and their ability to purchase healthier foods has increased.***

Over 90 percent of parents report that they have been more productive at work since their children have been enrolled and that their job security has increased as a result. With more job stability and increased discretionary income,

families have been able to purchase food items that were previously beyond their financial means.

As a key component of its strategies for reaching out to families, Club Y.E.S. holds a series of family nights that feature healthy meals and promote healthy lifestyles. Activities include encouraging enrollment of low-income families in the Food Stamp and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) programs for those who are eligible, which many are. Information about local resources such as farmers' markets and food banks is made available. And, healthy, inexpensive recipes that families can use at home are distributed. Over the last two years, the participation rate at these events has soared, and it has made a difference in food preparation styles and food preferences.

The same is true for annual events. Over 500 parents, children and family members attend Club Y.E.S.'s annual *Lights On!* events which highlight health, nutrition and physical activity. While youngsters demonstrate their dance, fit-sticks, cooking and other skills, parents have a chance to use the program's exercise machines and equipment and join in Dance, Dance Revolution. The focus is simple, and so is the message: Movement is fun!

## Promoting Positive Organizational Environments

***Largely through the program's efforts, school day lunches now include salads, and students have been successful in advocating for having more fresh fruits and vegetables as part of the district-provided snacks during the afternoon hours.***

Club Y.E.S. has established strong, authentic partnerships with the 27 schools in the four districts where its programs are located. The leadership team and site staff work closely with principals, teachers and classified staff to encourage students to participate in free and reduced price school breakfast and lunch programs and to strengthen school-wide

commitments to nutrition and physical activity, including opening all school kitchens for use during after school.

Part of the explanation for the program's success in influencing school environments lies in the fact that the overwhelming majority of participating students are becoming healthier and doing better in school. Attendance during the school day is up. Test scores and grades are better than they've been in the past, and children and young people are making decisions that enhance rather than diminish their health and well-being.

- Three-quarters of all participating students have missed seven or fewer

days of school during the year, by comparison with a much higher figure for their peers.

- Eighty-five percent of parents and teachers report significant improvement

in students' grades and standardized test scores.

- Eighty-seven percent of all students report that they are making better choices when it comes to drugs, alcohol, tobacco and gang involvement.

### Promoting Positive Community Environments

Located in a region where the unemployment rate is disproportionately high and getting worse, jobs have been provided for more than 1,200 local residents. The employment needs of a diverse group of people, including those entering the workforce for the first time, college students who are looking for part-time positions, and parents and retirees who need extra income, are being met. In addition to the benefits of employment, each of these individuals has been intimately involved in the campaign to improve everyone's health.

The program partners with farmers markets and the Farm-to-School Program to provide additional fresh fruits and vegetables to students and their families. While this might seem

unnecessary in California's Central Valley (which is a prime agricultural area serving much of the country), the unfortunate fact is that all too many families can't afford to buy fresh produce themselves. It is a lot less expensive to buy rice and beans in large quantities than broccoli or other fresh vegetables in even small quantities. Club Y.E.S. is helping to make produce more available and accessible.

***Ironically, families with children in this program live in agricultural communities and are often farm workers, but have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Club Y.E.S. helps compensate for this.***

### Promoting Positive Policy Changes

Lorie Werner, the program's director, works closely with school districts, cities, counties and health departments to advocate for the elimination of policies that work against children and young people becoming healthier and for those that encourage and reinforce positive behaviors. And, as part of its commitment to ensuring that students are an integral part of Club Y.E.S.'s inclusion of children in its approach, elementary students recently prepared and served hors d'oeuvres during a school board meeting and were well equipped to tell the board why what they were eating was healthy and why

it mattered. Students also frequently join the leadership team, staff members and parents in making presentations at city council meetings. At all levels, the program is having an impact on children, families and communities in the Central Valley. As a result, other neighboring school district districts are beginning to request support in their efforts to integrate similar strategies into their own afterschool programs and are participating in trainings with County Office of Education teachers and Club Y.E.S. staff.

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## THE YMCA OF SILICON VALLEY

## Metropolitan San Jose

The YMCA of Silicon Valley has increased its afterschool program services in diverse, low-income neighborhoods by close to one thousand percent since 2000, bringing \$30 million into high poverty communities, providing unique opportunities for more than 20,000 children and leveraging state and federal dollars to ensure balanced, diversified and sustainable funding for the long-term. Developed in partnership with the Santa Clara County Office of Education and funded by Kaiser Permanente, the program's signature component, *Fit for Learning for Afterschool*, is a multi-faceted project that

increases physical activity and encourages healthy nutrition among elementary school students by addressing the environment at every level. It is based on and coordinated with the school-based, countywide *Fit for Learning* Initiative that promotes healthy eating and increased physical activity. The program's comprehensive approach clearly demonstrates the potential afterschool programs can have when they use the socio-ecological model as a framework and integrate exemplary practices into their approaches.

### Promoting Positive Changes in Individuals

Students regularly engage in a wide variety of activities that are organized around monthly *Fit for Learning* themes. For example, in September the *Fruits and Veggies Matter* theme is designed to increase student awareness about agriculture, farming and food production and encourages students to consume more fruits and vegetables each day. In October, the theme changes to *Let's Move!* Students are encouraged to be physically active as many days of the week as possible in order to burn calories, improve their cardiovascular health and strengthen their muscles, bones and joints. And, in November students learn about *My Pyramid*, with the objective of getting them to eat a variety of foods from all food groups.

The YMCA of Silicon Valley encourages students to make healthy meal and snack choices, and reinforces this by participating in the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), both of which provide federal reimbursements. Second Harvest Food Bank gives children supplemental snacks as well as an assortment of healthy, ready-to-eat foods that they take home on Fridays. A combination of formal teaching and hands-on learning

- Helps students learn how to choose healthier foods and appropriate serving sizes,

- Focuses on the importance of eating a breakfast that contains three food groups and foods high in calcium and encourages students to participate in school breakfast programs where they are available,
- Teaches children about the importance of resisting advertisements that promote unhealthy foods,
- Provides them with opportunities to use critical thinking skills to explore different drink options and make choices about what is best for their bodies for optimal health and performance, and
- Educates them about physical activities that promote heart health.

In addition to tracking changes in food preferences and physical activity levels, the program assesses changes in students' health and physical well-being through individual student and family surveys, small group discussions and observations. FITNESSGRAM® data are used to measure aerobic capacity, upper body strength, endurance, abdominal strength and flexibility among kindergarten-eighth grade students. The staff takes care to ensure that children understand why they are taking the tests and how these relate to their own personal goals. Personal Best Day awards are given to students for their continued success in the areas of

nutrition and physical activity. The results are impressive. A striking 81 percent of the children and young people who could not previously pass

a portion of the healthy fitness tests administered by schools at the beginning of year passed all five elements by the end of the year!

### **Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships**

The YMCA of Silicon Valley works closely with the Health and Nutrition Division within the Santa Clara County Public Health Department to provide training for its entire staff. Healthy lifestyle choices are promoted through wellness lectures and staff newsletters that include recipes and incentive programs for employees to increase their consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables and become more physically active. All staff members are given memberships to local YMCAs and encouraged to use the facilities to become more physically fit. Employees are becoming healthier and, in turn, even more positive role models for children.

Unlike most afterschool programs, the YMCA not only focuses on food security as a priority, it takes a multi-faceted approach to addressing the issue. Staff are trained in ways that help them understand how the environments in which children and young people live both influence and limit what food is available and affordable and what choices they have or do not have. The staff also helps families learn how they can maximize their limited budgets to provide healthier meals.

Families come together for a variety of special events that focus on improving nutrition and physical activity and providing families with the information and resources they need to make good choices. Potlucks, including an annual Cinco de Mayo celebration, feature healthy meals, fun physical activities and piñatas filled with sugar-free candy, stickers and erasers.

### **Promoting Positive Organizational Environments**

By working with, aligning and reinforcing what happens during the school day, the YMCA ensures that children and young people receive consistent messages about the importance of

To ensure that current information on a variety of types of assistance is easily accessible, brochures identifying local community resources such as food banks, food stamps, WIC and free medical clinics are provided at these events and posted at sign-out locations when parents pick up their children every day. In a recent study:

- Forty-six percent of the families of children attending the program reported that their shopping preferences had changed since their children had been enrolled, and
- Just over a third of parents stated that they were preparing healthier meals with the recipes their children brought home from their cooking classes and those they were given at special events.

***Staff training goes beyond ensuring that employees know how to deliver effective program components to increasing their awareness of the devastating problem of children not having enough to eat – and what they can do to make a difference.***

Encouraging families to become more physically active, and supporting their efforts, is also an integral part of the program's approach to increasing the positive interpersonal influences that surround students. In partnership with the County Trail System, the program makes it possible for parents and siblings to participate in hiking and other outdoor activities at no cost. And, students and their families have access to YMCA facilities at a reduced rate.

good nutrition and physical activity. The careful alignment with schools and community organizations across the entire county through *Fit for Learning* monthly themes is a stunning example of this.

In addition, each year the program invites the entire school community to be part of a Healthy Kids Day – a free event at local YMCAs that encourages families and children to engage in creative activities that promote wellness and healthy living. It also partners with schools to provide walk-a-thon events to help raise

awareness about *America on the Move*, a national YMCA initiative designed to help families lead healthier life styles by increasing the number of steps they take each day. Water bottles and pedometers are donated to all participants, children and adults alike.

## Promoting Positive Community Environments

The YMCA's close relationship with the Santa Clara County Office of Education goes a long way toward changing the community environments in which children and young people live. Social marketing campaigns also extend into the broader community through partnerships with healthcare providers and agencies. The program regularly collaborates with Kaiser Permanente and the Santa Clara County Public Health Department, and through its community outreach efforts a local pediatrician in the Santa Clara County Hospital System now routinely recommends the program to overweight children and adolescent patients.

***Having employer-provided healthcare benefits has made it possible for children to have regular check-ups – a critical factor in addressing childhood obesity and other preventable health issues.***

The program's job opportunities and employment practices have also had a significant impact on the broader community. The number of jobs provided has increased ten-fold in the last ten years, providing meaningful

jobs for more than 1,600 community members. What is especially important is that with the high cost of living in Santa Clara County, many people must work two or more jobs, often without benefits, to make ends meet. Unlike most employers, the YMCA provides healthcare benefits for both full- and part-time workers.

The program has also been highly successful in bringing in more than \$8.5 million in funding to the community, in addition to the core grants it receives annually through California's Afterschool Education and Safety Program and federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers – money that would not otherwise be available to support the program and its community-wide efforts. Funding through the Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP), the Centers for Disease Control REACH program and Kaiser Permanente have made it possible to strengthen the quality of program *and* document and evaluate the impact it is having on children, families and communities – evidence that is capable of going a long way toward influencing even greater changes in the larger environment.

## Promoting Positive Policy Changes

As Vice President of Program and Community Development, Mary Hoshiko is an active and influential advocate for policy changes at the local, state and national levels. She serves as the California YMCA Child Care Public Policy Committee Chairperson and in this capacity works with YMCAs throughout the state on public policy issues. She leads two initiatives: the YMCA Diversity Initiative and the Activate America Pioneering Healthy Communities Initiative. She is an After School Ambassador with the Afterschool Alliance, a national

advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., and works closely with the Centers for Disease Control.

The program joins Kaiser Permanente, state legislators, the Santa Clara Unified School District and others each year in a high level media event that focuses on the difference it's making in the lives of tens of thousands of children. A voice for middle and high school students is made available through the *Youth Health Advocate* Program that gives young

people opportunities to meet with their local school board members and other community leaders to present health topics and discuss local health policies.

In collaboration with Kaiser Permanente and the Santa Clara County Public Health Department, the YMCA's *Projecto Movimiento* youth participants are co-producing a *Voice of Youth*

documentary focusing on the childhood obesity crisis and what's being done about it. And, Latino children wrote and starred in a series of public service announcements (PSAs) that were recently aired on cable television. Through a combination of strategies, the YMCA of Silicon Valley is reaching, and influencing, large numbers of community members and policy makers, and it is making a difference.

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## CONCLUSION

The impact that these programs are having on children's lives provides strong evidence that comprehensive afterschool programs are well-positioned to become part of the urgently needed solution to the childhood obesity crisis. In California alone, nearly \$1 billion in annual funding is available through the state's *After School Education and Safety Programs*, federal *21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers* dollars and local investments. More than \$3.4 billion has already been funded nationally, with programs operating in every state. The platform for reaching millions of children and influencing their eating patterns and physical activity levels clearly exists. It's afterschool programs!

Building on this is smart – and cost-effective. As the programs in the Healthy Behaviors Initiative have demonstrated, a lot can be done at very little additional expense.

***“With data showing us that every \$1 spent on prevention strategies yields us a savings of more than \$5 in healthcare costs, we have no choice but to direct our limited dollars into programs that work.”***  
**—Tom Harkin, Chairman, U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee.**

By capitalizing on practices that have already been developed and adopting approaches that have already proven to lead to positive results, the return on investments is likely to exceed 1,000 percent or more. The key, as these programs and the others in this Initiative have shown, is to approach this work with a strong sense of purpose and a high level of intentionality. Children can't wait, and neither can we!

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The Healthy Behaviors Initiative is funded by the generous support of the *Network for a Healthy California* in the California Department of Public Health, The California Endowment and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Additional publications made possible through this Initiative include: *Taking Advantage of an Unprecedented Opportunity: Afterschool Programs and the Childhood Obesity Crisis* and *Changing Lives, Saving Lives: A Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Exemplary Practices in Healthy Eating, Physical Activity and Food Security in Afterschool Programs*.

For more information about California's Healthy Behaviors Initiative, please contact the Center for Collaborative Solutions at 916-567-9911 or visit its web site at [www.afterschoolsolutions.org](http://www.afterschoolsolutions.org)

**Afterschool Afterschool and Childhood Obesity:**

**Two Case Studies**

Second in a Series

## **COMBATING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS**

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS,  
THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL  
AND THE HEALTHY BEHAVIORS INITIATIVE:  
TWO CASE STUDIES

Andria J. Fletcher, PhD

MT. DIABLO CARES  
BAY AREA

FITNESS 4 LIFE, PAJARO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL  
DISTRICT  
RURAL CENTRAL VALLEY COAST



Center for Collaborative Solutions  
[www.afterschoolsolutions.org](http://www.afterschoolsolutions.org)



## Introduction

Among the millions of children and young people in our communities, poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyles cause serious health issues, lower self-esteem, lead to social and psychological problems and contribute to poor academic performance. Overweight is the most common health problem facing children today, and it has reached epidemic proportions. It ranks as the public's #1 concern for children in the United States, ahead of drugs, alcohol and gangs, and is the focus of First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* campaign.

Although childhood obesity crosses all socioeconomic lines, children living in poverty are disproportionately affected. It is all too common for families with limited financial resources to sacrifice the quality of food for quantity and to consume large amounts of food when it is available to compensate for times when it is not. Easy access to high concentrations of fast food chains and corner markets compounds the problem. And, unsafe neighborhoods make it difficult, if not impossible, for children to get the exercise they need to be healthy. All of this contributes to the likelihood that they will become overweight.

If these patterns continue into adulthood, one in every three children born in 2000 and one in every two children of color is likely to develop type 2 diabetes in his or her lifetime. This, and other medical issues, will lead to an unprecedented rate of premature death and disability, diminished workplace productivity and staggering financial repercussions for families, insurers, healthcare providers and our society.

As devastating as this is, we know that children who develop healthy eating habits and are physically active at an early age are much more likely to be well and stay well. We also know that barriers to this happening are shared among the community as a whole – and that when these barriers are lowered or removed, changes in individual behavior become more achievable and sustainable. The socio-ecological model makes a compelling case that the most effective route to healthy behaviors comes through a combination of efforts at all levels – individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and public policy.

There is a growing body of evidence that comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to be a driving force in this effort. Through a combination of federal, state and local funding, these programs already reach almost a million low-income children in California and many more across the nation. Building on this platform makes sense. It can be done at minimal cost to taxpayers and pay huge dividends.

Comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to combat childhood obesity in ways that are fiscally prudent, socially responsible and politically appealing.

California's Healthy Behaviors Initiative offers a prime example of how this can happen. Funded by the *Network for a Healthy California* (a division of the California Department of Public Health), the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and The California

Endowment, the Center for Collaborative Solutions has spent the last five years developing exemplary practices in nutrition and physical activity, vetting them with experts and field testing them in 10 multi-site afterschool programs serving over 75,000 elementary and middle school students. Located in inner cities, metropolitan areas and rural communities throughout the state, these programs now offer regional Healthy Behaviors Learning Centers and provide support to many other programs. Two of these programs are included in these case studies. They offer examples of the approaches that are being used, the changes that are taking place in children's eating habits and physical fitness levels, and the impact that this initiative is capable of having throughout the United States.

## MT. DIABLO CARES Bay Area

Located in low-income neighborhoods in Central and East Contra Costa County, the Collaborative for Academics, Recreation and Enrichment for Students (CARES) program is a unique partnership among the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, the Ambrose Recreation and Parks District, the City of Concord and Bay Area Community Resources (BACR). Serving a largely Latino and African-American population that has been severely impacted by the economic downturn, CARES has made huge inroads into addressing food security issues by establishing remarkable community and site-based gardens and partnering with a local food bank to provide literally hundreds of tons of fresh fruits and vegetables to children and families in need. In recognition of its work and the difference it has made, the program received the 2010 Governor's Spotlight Award Silver Medal (and \$2,500) and was awarded first place in the regional Governor's Challenge for Physical Activity in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

### Promoting Positive Individual Behaviors

CARES holds a powerful a vision of children changing the world through their own actions and their impact on their peers, families and communities. To bring this vision into reality, the program approaches its work with laser-sharp intentionality, demonstrating how committed the leadership team has been to removing influences that make it difficult for children to improve their health and well-being, and how successful it has been in replacing these with healthy alternatives. A zero tolerance policy for junk food on its campuses is just one of many examples of how this program has raised the bar. Although not everyone agreed with the policy in the beginning, widespread support now exists.

In addition, students are learning more about why it's so important to eat well to be well. They attend nutrition classes five hours a week. Each session emphasizes the social and emotional aspects of healthy behaviors and provides hands-on learning experiences that include

A zero tolerance for junk food policy has raised the bar in the program's promotion of healthy eating campaign.

An increasing number of children are reaching their targeted healthy fitness zones in one or more categories of California's FITNESSGRAM tests.

cooking, gardening, fresh fruits and vegetables tastings and snacks. Their research-based curricula, Farm to Fork and The Power of Choice, are supplemented with Nutrition to Grow On, *Children's Power Play!*, *Reading Across My Pyramid*, *Harvest of the Month* newsletters and the Dairy Council's *Deal Me In* materials. Even the youngest children know how to read product labels – and they have a strong sense of why it's important to make decisions that enhance rather than inhibit their health and well-being.

The program ensures that students engage in 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity every day by using CATCH and SPARK curricula, and KidTribe and Geo Mats supplemental resources. Providing these opportunities is paying off. At Riverview Middle School Healthy Behaviors Learning Center, 59 percent of the seventh grade students reached the healthy fitness zone in all six of the state-mandated FITNESSGRAM categories.

Keenly aware of the importance of continuing to support children during the months when school is not in session, CARES expanded their summer program to operate six hours a day for six weeks in 2010. In addition to providing its regular academic, enrichment and recreational programming, 50,382 breakfasts and 63,459 lunches were served last year alone. By partnering with the Contra Costa County Department of Health in the summer *Rethink Your Drink* campaign, students had access to and consumed much more water than would have otherwise been the case. And, they had the opportunity to visit a local farmers' market and swim at a local water park once a week.

The benefits are evident in several ways, not the least of which is the impact on students' performance in school. Children are attending school more regularly, and doing better when they're there.

- The majority of those with a grade of C or lower in the fall increased their performance by at least one grade, and often more.
- Classroom teachers reported that 90 percent of the students who attended the program showed improvement in their confidence in learning, 71 percent strengthened their leadership skills and more than three-quarters were more attentive during their classes.
- Eight out of 10 students reported that CARES helped them develop their social and emotional skills, stay out of trouble and make better choices.

### **Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships**

Unlike many other afterschool programs, CARES has a staff retention rate of 83 percent, an exceptionally high level. This has proven to be an important factor in the program's success. In large part, it is attributable to the vision and passion of the leadership team, the support the staff receives and the degree to which everyone shares a commitment to a common purpose in improving students' health and well-being.

Staff members receive 35 hours of formal training annually *and* ongoing on-site coaching and mentoring. Workshop topics include cooking in the classroom and garden-enhanced nutrition education. Research-based curricula support learning in physical activity. Staff members take what they learn to heart in their own personal lives as well as in the work they do with children and young people. Most are physically active outside of the program, and many participate in local football and basketball leagues.

Because staff members typically live in the neighborhoods where the program's sites are located, they are intimately familiar with the challenges that make it difficult, if not impossible, for children to eat well or to get the exercise they need to be healthy. Very few parks exist, and where they do, they're often unsafe. Parents are typically not in a financial position to support their children taking lessons or participating in activities such as martial arts or tennis or dance – all of which are accessible to more affluent members of surrounding areas. The program not only provides students with safe opportunities for physical activity and sports five days a week, it also results in staff taking advantage of the time to be active themselves, as well as to support children and young people in what they are doing.

The CARES leadership team and staff clearly understand the challenges families face. They know how serious the issue of food security is, especially under the current economic conditions. With unemployment at more than 21 percent, generally low wages and the comparatively high prices of fresh fruits and vegetables, families often don't have enough to eat, much less the financial means to purchase healthy foods. Compounding this, the majority of children in the program are Latino and African-American, the two groups most vulnerable to childhood overweight and obesity, and the most likely to acquire type 2 diabetes as a result.

CARES is doing something about this – in a big way! Through its partnership with the Contra Costa and Solano County Food Bank, hundreds of tons of fresh produce have been delivered to the program's sites for the past three years. Fresh fruits and vegetables are available during the program, and children are given bags of fruits and vegetables to take home to their families. Site directors also attend Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—CalFresh in California, formerly Food Stamps) trainings offered by the food bank and the Contra Costa County Health Department. Parent outreach strategies provide information about how to access SNAP benefits and other services, and baskets of healthy food are routinely raffled off at Family Nights. Attendance at the program's annual Sports Banquet is at full capacity. And families report an increase in the use of healthy program-generated recipes at home.

Although the program focuses primarily on elementary school students, it also includes meaningful opportunities for middle and high school students. Middle school volunteers, many of whom were formerly program participants, inspire younger children to be more physically active and serve as positive role models. The forty-nine high school students who participated in the Teen Garden Corps Program this year are especially effective in encouraging children to change their eating habits.

Middle school volunteers and high school members of the Teen Garden Corps are making a real difference in younger children's lives.

Every Teen Garden Corps participant receives a \$500 stipend and community service credit, and is guaranteed a position in the program after completion of the initial work. Fifteen of the Garden Corps graduates now work in paid jobs as Recreation Specialists and oversee garden projects (which now exist at every one of the program's

18 schools), providing younger children with ongoing opportunities to taste a wide variety of fruits and vegetables and use fresh produce in their cooking classes. Their influence has proven to play a major role in changing the eating habits of younger students in the program.

### **Promoting Positive Organizational Environments**

Over the years, CARES has developed strong, positive relationships with schools, garnered the support of principals and teachers, and created close ties with food service managers. These efforts have paid huge dividends. Kitchens with full refrigerators are available for use in afterschool cooking classes and for storage, and mobile kitchens are now available at every site. Staff members are trained by food service personnel in food handling and safety. And, largely because of the program's efforts, salad bars are up and running at two elementary school sites. At one of these, the amount of produce consumed in school lunches doubled in the first three months of the salad bar! There will be two more starting up this year.

CARES' exceptionally strong partnership with schools is a major reason for its ability to make a real difference in children's eating habits.
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Like most programs, daily snacks are provided by the school district, but with one major difference. The staff is given the opportunity to choose from a variety of options and makes the decisions based on children's expressed preferences at each site. In addition, through the support of the California Department of Education's Instructional School Garden Program, all sites now have gardens, and students have access to fresh fruits and vegetables as part of their snacks and cooking and nutrition classes. CARES also takes the lead in providing school-wide events and assemblies, including a Health Fair and a Nutrition Decathlon; celebrates National Nutrition Month; and ensures that posters sending healthy eating messages are displayed in the cafeteria and on the campus.

### **Promoting Positive Community Environments**

CARES is actively involved in the communities it serves and works hard to influence changes that go well beyond the afterschool hours and the physical sites where the program is located. A member of its leadership team is part of the local food bank's Food and Nutrition Consortium, the Contra Costa Child Care Coalition for Activity and Nutrition, and the Afterschool 4 All Alliance. The number of partnerships that have been, and continue to be, developed is testimony to the program's emphasis on collaboration. These collaborative partners include the *Bay Area Network for a Healthy California*, the Contra Costa County Public Health's NEW (Nutrition, Exercise and Wellness) Kids Program, the City of Concord, Kaiser Permanente, Diablo Valley College, the University of California Cooperative Extension, Junior Achievement and Wells Fargo Bank. In recognition of its efforts, the *Network for a Healthy California* presented Debra Mason, a member of the leadership team, with the 2008 Champions for Change Community Engagement Award.

CARES has also partnered with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano in a video highlighting the Farm to School and Farm 2 Kids Programs. A strong supporter, Kaiser Hospital currently features the Bay Point Garden Project on display at its facilities. The Contra Costa Child Care Council brings pre-school children to the community garden once a week, and child care centers whose staff have seen the CARES garden are now following the CARES lead and planting their own gardens.

### **Promoting Positive Policy Changes**

Debra Mason, a member of the CARES leadership team and the driving force behind the program's nutrition and physical activity efforts, is a member of the California State Board of Education's Child Nutrition Advisory Council and is a leading advocate for policy changes at all levels. She is a nationally recognized presenter who delivers ten *Changing Lives, Saving Lives* workshops a year to enthusiastic audiences. And, she recently received the community Volunteer of the Year Award from the local food bank.

Debra has worked closely with the Local Municipal Advisory Council to champion local policies, with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition to promote passage of the federal Child Nutrition Reauthorization and with Senator Barbara Boxer to promote health-enhancing policies at the federal level. CARES and its community garden are often cited as prime examples of the importance of the Farm to School Program and the importance of improving children's nutrition when U.S. Representative George Miller speaks on Capitol Hill. In recognition of Debra's work and the impact the program is having, CARES won the 2010 League of California Afterschool Providers award for Exemplary Practices in Inter-governmental Collaboration.

## **FITNESS 4 LIFE**

### **Rural Central California Coast**

According to Santa Cruz County's *Go for Health* Initiative, the county ranks as one of the worst in California's for overweight children under the age of five, with the estimated cost of the obesity epidemic in the county at more than \$300 million and rising. One in eight local citizens are pre-diabetic or diabetic, and the age at which the onset of type 2 diabetes is occurring is getting lower each year.

As an integral part of the Pajaro Valley Unified School District's afterschool programs, Fitness 4 Life is making great strides in addressing these issues. It is making a difference in the lives of thousands of elementary, middle and high school students and their families by increasing their access to healthy foods, helping them improve their eating habits and providing a wide range of opportunities for them to be physically activity.

### **Promoting Positive Individual Behaviors**

Fitness for Life is committed to its vision of *youth developing skills for a healthy future*. The stakes are high, and the challenges are daunting. Although Watsonville is located within a few miles of the coast, most children have never seen the Pacific Ocean. Even fewer have ever learned to swim. Tragically, as many as 15 children drown each year. Even though the setting is rural, there are few places where children can safely play, get the exercise they need, develop their physical skills or acquire healthy interests that can last a lifetime.

Similarly, while the community is located in the heart of one of California's and the nation's most important agricultural centers, the staples of most family meals are rice and beans, with few and only intermittent fruits, vegetables or fish. And, corner markets and fast food restaurants are easier to access than fruit stands, which are typically located on the outskirts of the town.

Fortunately, the more than 2,500 students who attend the program each year have a significant advantage. Unlike their peers who tend to spend much of their out of school time watching television, playing video games, taking care of their younger brothers and sisters or hanging out on street corners, they're actively engaged in biking, swimming, salsa and hip hop dance, soccer, hula hooping, table tennis, exercise and fitness classes, and SPARK games.

Through a partnership with a local high school, every student in Fitness 4 Life learns how to swim. With instruction from a former world-class cyclist, students become skilled bike riders, are knowledgeable about safety and have opportunities to ride on bike trails in the rolling hills of the countryside. And, many middle school students engage in sports, building their stamina and endurance, and helping them prepare for the program's annual triathlons.

Each year, hundreds of students train for and participate in major year-end triathlon events.
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Fitness 4 Life addresses children’s eating preferences and habits through a combination of hands-on nutrition education, organic gardening and cooking classes. Students learn about portion control, the nutritional values of foods and the importance of drinking beverages with zero sugar, increasing their water consumption and reading product labels. Second Harvest Food Bank, local farms and produce from the program’s community and school-based gardens provide fruits and vegetables for cooking classes, special events, and supplements to District-provided afternoon snacks. Holiday treats focus on multicultural menus, all of which feature nutritious options. And, at Halloween, pirate races and booty piñatas filled with healthy foods have replaced candy.

Fitness 4 Life is clear about the connections between children’s health and their performance in school. Its motto is *an apple a day keeps the absences away*, and it’s working!

The program’s motto—an apple a day keeps the absences away—captures the emphasis the District places on academics and the clear connection it sees between children’s health and their ability to perform well in school. Students in the program are attending school much more regularly, and it’s making a difference in their grades and standardized test scores.

In the last year, close to half have moved from Far Below Basic to Basic, and a third increased their test score levels from Below Basic to Basic in English Language Arts, while 75 percent scored at the Proficient or Advanced levels in mathematics. According to classroom teachers, children and young people in the program are more attentive and able to concentrate for longer periods of time. And they’re better behaved. In stark contrast to the statistics for the general student population, last year every Watsonville High School student who regularly attended the program enrolled in college!

### **Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships**

A great deal of the success of the program can be attributed to the passion and dedication of the director, the leadership team and the site staff. Staff retention is exceptionally high, demonstrating a strong commitment to the work, the program and the future of the students. Most site staff go on to college to pursue much needed careers in medical, health and education, and each year 25 high school students are hired as junior staff members and wellness leaders.

The program extends its support beyond the afterschool hours to help ensure positive relationships with families, and to provide them with a variety of important resources including family health fairs and access to information about local services and benefits they may qualify for. As part of the Starlight Pilot Program, students and their families have access to free health, vision and dental screenings and follow-up consultations.

## Promoting Positive Organizational Environments

The afterschool program staff and school personnel exemplify what it means to have an authentic partnership. Systems have been developed that enable site staff to have immediate and ongoing information about each individual student, from attendance during the school day to their grades and test scores, to areas in which they're doing well and areas in need of improvement. Communication between staff members and teachers provides mutually meaningful information. And students benefit in huge ways from an environment that supports their success.

Site directors are seen as administrators and are actively involved in supporting student academic progress, providing children and young people with enriching opportunities that would not otherwise be available to them. They help to develop and implement school wellness policies. They're often in charge of back-to-school nights and work closely with Healthy Start offices.

Site staff oversee school gardens, and the District's nutrition services director works closely with the program to ensure food is handled safely (the program makes use of mobile kitchens, which it has purchased, to prepare snacks for students). The leadership team at Cesar Chavez Middle school also works with the adjacent high school to train parent activists and facilitate Diabetes Center group meetings.

Fitness 4 Life partnered with the District's nutrition services to apply for (and win) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grants for six elementary school sites with afterschool programs.

Both elementary and middle schools invest in the program financially and work closely with the leadership team and staff in a variety of other ways as well. Fitness 4 Life partnered with the District's nutrition services to apply for a USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant. They were funded for six of the elementary schools where the afterschool program is located. Under the original Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant at Cesar Chavez Middle School, 18,000 pounds (nine tons!) of fresh produce were served annually.

In recognition of its Fitness 4 Life program, Pajaro Valley Unified School District was selected as the 2009 Central Coast Region School District of the year by the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Spotlight Awards.

## Promoting Positive Community Environments

Fitness 4 Life is part of the *Go for Health!* Initiative that has developed a comprehensive plan to increase healthy nutrition and regular physical activity among children and youth in Santa Cruz County in order to address the county's childhood obesity epidemic. The overarching goal of the collaborative is for all children to be physically fit. Their approach focuses on supporting children in having at least one hour of physical activity each day and implementing environmental prevention strategies that change or improve community standards, systems, structures and attitudes that influence individual behaviors. Jennifer Bruno, the Director of Fitness 4 Life, co-chairs the schools

committee of the *Go for Health!* Initiative and received one of the second annual School Wellness Policy Awards for their healthy nutrition program, school gardens and creative physical education program.

Fitness 4 Life not only supports the *Go for Health!* overarching goal and its approaches, it ensures that positive changes will happen for all of its participating students. It does this by connecting with local farms to increase access to a variety of fresh local produce, increasing the number of school and community gardens, facilitating access to farmers markets, working with local health care providers to offer health screenings to students and decreasing the barriers and improving the opportunities for students to embrace physical activity as a daily and life-long pattern of behavior.

Through its collaboration with community partners, Fitness 4 Life goes a long way toward helping increase the number of low-income families who access vital resources.

Through this collaboration—and in partnership with the Chief of Santa Cruz Public Health, Salud Para La Gente, United Way, and the Robert Wood Johnson and S.H. Cowell Foundations—Fitness 4 Life not only supports the county-wide 52-10 plan (that includes five servings of fruits and vegetables daily), it helps increase the number of qualified families who take advantage of SNAP (CalFresh in California, formerly Food Stamps), and, because of this, can better afford to purchase fresh produce.

### **Promoting Positive Policy Changes**

As part of its ongoing efforts to promote positive changes in public policy, the Director of the Fitness 4 Life Program, Jennifer Bruno, has played an important role in bringing individuals and organizations together to advocate for and implement policies changes. In addition to presenting workshops at conferences, she arranges for publicly elected officials at the local and state level to visit sites and keeps them informed about changes that are occurring and the difference they are making. Fitness 4 Life actively engages the media and the public to move funders and public policymakers toward creating a healthier environment—and it’s making a difference in the lives of children, families and the community!

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These case studies were developed by the Center for Collaborative Solutions under the Healthy Behaviors Initiative (HBI). This Initiative is funded by the generous support of the California Department of Public Health’s *Network for a Healthy California* through USDA SNAP (known in California as CalFresh—formerly Food Stamps), The California Endowment; and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. For additional information about HBI, go to [www.afterschoolsolutions.org](http://www.afterschoolsolutions.org). There you will find our guide, *Changing Lives, Saving Lives: A Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Exemplary Practices in Healthy Eating, Physical Activity and Food Security in Afterschool Programs*, and the first set of three case studies.