

Encouraging Healthy Lifestyles



TOPIC: HEALTH EDUCATION

DISTRICT: CENTER 26 JT

LOCATION: CENTER, COLO.

INTRODUCTION

The state's highest rate of poverty is 250 miles south of Denver in the small town of Center. Ninety-one percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. For Center School District, educating its 475 students about healthy lifestyles and good decision making is leading to improved student achievement.

OUR STORY

The town of Center is in the heart of southern Colorado's San Luis Valley. Surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo and San Juan mountain ranges, the valley is economically dependent upon agriculture.

Half of students' parents don't speak English, and most work several low-paying jobs that leave students unsupervised outside of school.

When Superintendent George Welsh arrived in 1996 as the middle and high school principal, he asked to see a list of students with five unexcused absences. Every student was on the list. Expanded to 20 unexcused absences, the list wasn't much shorter.

"We had a lot of issues," says Welsh. "Community attitudes were that it's OK for kids to smoke pot or be out until 2 a.m. Kids were coming to school not ready to learn."

Since then the district has set new, higher expectations to address every student's needs. "It's just doing the right thing at the right time," says Welsh, who became superintendent in 1997. "To me, it all works together. Anyone working to increase achievement in a school like ours has to start with healthy lifestyles and choices."

Welsh gave Katrina Ruggles, school prevention and health education coordinator, carte blanche to apply for every health education grant she could find—from educating students on options to prevent pregnancy to helping parents access counseling services for students.

"When you serve low-income students, you qualify for lots of grants," says Welsh. In fact, Ruggles' contract position with the district is funded almost entirely by grants—and has been for more than 12 years.

SOLUTIONS

Center School District offers comprehensive health education sequentially from kindergarten through high school. Ruggles worked with teachers and the district's full-time nurse to add health education into other content areas.

For example, when elementary school students study the skeletal and muscular systems, they also learn how drugs and alcohol influence the brain.

In middle school, all seventh- and eighth-graders spend one full year in a twice-a-week life skills class that addresses topics such as understanding the effects of drug and alcohol use, handling peer pressure, setting goals, making good decisions and communicating with others. "We have a great time," says Ruggles, who teaches those classes. "It's fun for the kids."

In high school, Ruggles teaches a senior seminar to help students prepare for college and adult life, incorporating health issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault and health insurance.

And every high school student must take one year of daily health education to graduate. High school students use their school-issued laptops to research health issues. "We might take a health topic, and the



did you know...

... for the first time, Colorado has adopted comprehensive health education standards? The standards promote the development of healthy skills and habits for lifelong wellness and include nutrition; sexual, emotional, social and mental health; and alcohol, drug, tobacco, injury and violence prevention.

kids will create a video about it," says Center High School Principal Kevin Jones. "They learn how to access and critique information, and advocate for themselves."

Jones says the school also emphasizes physical education where students learn about healthy activities they can use for the rest of their lives, like hiking. "We honor PE time. It matters for kids to be active, especially when they're not active out of school. It's beneficial because of the high rate of heart disease here in the valley."

The high school also offers four "BFS"—bigger, faster, stronger—weightlifting classes. "It's a lifestyle of learning healthy choices and preventing disease," says Jones.

The weight room is open to students and the community for two hours each evening year-round. "We have 25 to 30 people out there every day, all summer and winter long," says Jones.

Keeping students busy with engaging and meaningful after-school opportunities is another strategy for success in Center, like the Viking Navigators peer mentoring program that pairs high school students with younger students.

More than 100 students participate. They meet every Monday for a mix of one-on-one mentoring and large-group lessons such as eating healthy, getting enough sleep and test-taking skills. Once a month, they add a recreational activity like a basketball tournament.

“Older kids take it seriously,” says Welsh. “Their behavior improves and so do the younger kids. They learn it’s OK to say no to bad behavior and to study hard.”

Ruggles trains the older students in mentoring techniques. Some even get additional leadership and service-learning training, including real-world health advocacy opportunities to present health topics and data to parents and others in their community and across Colorado.

In a small town where “there’s not much to do,” the students say the program motivates them to do better and reach their goals. It sets the norm for all students to do well in school and make healthy choices.

“It makes you feel good to help a younger kid,” says sophomore Brenda Chavez. “You’re learning and they’re learning. I’ve learned how to have patience by doing this. It helped me be more involved in school, and now my GPA is higher.”

Ofelia Gonzalez, also a sophomore, agrees. “It helps them stay out of trouble and away from drugs, and learn how to set goals. And I’ve become more open, not so shy. I see that I have the power to make choices and speak out and impact people. I didn’t think that when I was smaller.”

A health advisory committee made up of community members, a teacher and administrators analyze data from the mentoring program and other efforts, and define health education goals for the district.

“We meet four times a year to share what’s going on,” says Ruggles, who heads the committee. “For example, if we identify higher pregnancy rates, we work together to find community contacts who can help with this problem.”

RESULTS

Since 1996, the graduation rate has jumped from 33 percent to 90 percent, and 75 percent of students are graduating with college credit, up from 25 percent in 1996. Attendance is better, and grade point averages have gone up.



“Students are more focused,” Ruggles says. “They’re talking about their future, they’re making healthy choices and they’re choosing postsecondary education.”

Since 2005, they are also more involved in athletics, sports and clubs. Students’ use of alcohol and cigarettes is down significantly in Center—surpassing decreases reported statewide for all students, according to five years of Healthy Kids Colorado Survey data.

“While Colorado experienced an increase in students chewing tobacco and using marijuana, we have experienced a decrease,” says Ruggles.

The same data shows that fewer students are choosing anti-social and high-risk behaviors at an early age, and fewer students believe their peers are using substances. “If students believe that fewer students are using substances, they are also less likely to use,” says Ruggles.

Results for mentors and mentees alike in the Viking Navigators program also are dramatic. They miss fewer days of school and have higher grade point averages than other students. Before they joined the program, these same students on average were missing *more* days of school than their peers.

Students in the mentoring program report making more of an effort in school, enjoying school more than

they did before and seeing the relevance of education to their success in life. Pre- and post-tests show significant gains in their ability to analyze the various factors contributing to their problems and resolve conflict. They also say they feel more confident in their abilities to set and achieve goals, and appropriately involve themselves in social activities.

WHAT'S NEXT

The district and the health advisory committee now are concentrating efforts on students’ low perceived risk of drug use and the use of alcohol in sexual encounters, areas of need according to their most recent Healthy Kids Colorado Survey data. These are risky perceptions and behaviors because they increase students’ engagement in sexual activity in general, including forced activity, and decrease their likelihood of using contraception.

BEFORE AND AFTER

Before: Almost half of students reporting a low commitment to school. More than half reporting they used alcohol, and one in five used marijuana. Only 33 percent of high school students graduating.

After: More than two-thirds of students committed to school. The number of students reporting alcohol use cut in half. Marijuana and tobacco use significantly decreased. Now, 90 percent high school graduation rate.

DOING IT FOR FREE

Arrange to share staff with local community resources or social and mental health service agencies. Center School District spends just \$500 annually for the equivalent of two full-time and one part-time mental health service professionals who provide interventions such as anger management and substance abuse counseling.



did you know...

... districts can administer the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey to students and use results to make decisions about health priorities in their school community? Visit <http://collaboration.omni.org/sites/hkcs/SitePages/Home.aspx>.

ABOUT US

District: *Center 26 JT*

Location: *Center, Colo.*

Number of students: *475*

Percentage of students who qualify
for free or reduced lunch:

91 percent

Or tap community volunteers. “I first try to find the correct person to come—someone who is good with kids, like someone who has overcome substance abuse or a professional who works in public health,” says Jones. Another tip: “Take kids to other schools and put together a health-related presentation. It costs \$20 in gas.”

ADVICE

Changing students’ attitudes toward school and their own well-being is no small task. Superintendent George Welsh offers this advice:

- Choose to address students’ basic needs. “It’s a choice. I think too many schools make the choice that they can’t impact things like substance abuse. If you’re in a situation where you’re trying to grow student achievement, do this work alongside that.”
- Free up principals to be instructional leaders. “When I first was a principal, all I did was process behavior referrals. Now, we pay a paraprofessional hourly to track down kids who skip school. The overtime costs \$25,000 a year. It’s worth it.”
- Hire a full-time nurse. “It’s worth the \$35,000-a-year investment so health education is done in a comprehensive fashion, not by untrained staff.”

MORE HELP

Colorado Department of Education: Unit of Academic Standards

www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/UAS/CoAcademicStandards.html

Find tools to help school districts implement Colorado’s first-ever health standards and the revised physical education standards. Visitors also can search the standards to find details they want.

Colorado Youth Matter

www.coloradoyouthmatter.org/resources/for-providers

Get support to select, implement and evaluate evidence-based sexual health programs for teens.

RMC Health

www.rmc.org

Work with this national leader to get professional development best practices that advance the health and well-being of children, youth, their schools and their communities.

SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP)

www.nrepp.samhsa.gov

Search this online registry of scientifically tested and reviewed programs to promote mental health and prevent substance abuse and violence. The registry provides research findings, the reviewer’s analysis and recommended questions to ask about the program.





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