

# No cupcakes here! Gold-medal school fights obesity

October 17 2011, By LINDSEY TANNER , AP Medical Writer

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(AP) -- Five-year-olds dance hip-hop to the alphabet. Third-graders learn math by twisting into geometric shapes, fifth-graders by calculating calories. And everyone goes to the gym - every day.

In the middle of America's heartland, a small public school, Northeast Elementary Magnet School, has taken on a hefty task - reversing obesity.

And it's won a gold medal for it, becoming the first elementary school in the country to receive that award from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. The Alliance was founded by the [American Heart Association](#) and the William J. Clinton Foundation to reduce [childhood obesity](#). Only two other schools have taken the gold.

The cafeteria here serves fresh fruit and veggies, low-fat or no-fat milk, no sodas or [fried foods](#) and no gooey desserts. There are no sweets on kids' birthdays and food is never used as a reward. Teachers wear pedometers and parents have to sign a contract committing to the school's healthy approach.

Northeast Elementary is not in some posh, progressive suburb. It's in Danville, Ill., an economically struggling city of 30,000 in farm country some 150 miles south of Chicago. But teachers, parents and students have embraced the rigorous curriculum and kids even call it "fun."

From the outside, it's a drab 50's-era yellow brick building in a blue-collar neighborhood of modest frame homes, a few blocks from a

homeless shelter and a Salvation Army donation center. Inside, it's a cheerful oasis for almost 300 kids and has caught the attention of some of the nation's biggest obesity-fighting advocates.

Former President Bill Clinton says the steps Northeast has taken are an exemplary way to tackle "a terrible public health problem."

"We will never change it by telling people how bad it is. We've got to show people how good it can be," Clinton said, paraphrasing a colleague at the Alliance's June awards ceremony in Little Rock, Ark.

Northeast's strict, no-goodies program might sound extreme, but students seem to have bought it.

During a recent nutrition lesson, first-graders sat raptly on the hallway floor as a teacher read "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," a classic kids' story about a caterpillar that can't seem to stop eating - all kinds of fruit at first. But when the bug moved on to chocolate cake and ice cream, the youngsters gasped and said in hushed tones, "junk food," as if it were poison.

"We're a healthy school," says 10-year-old Naomi Woods, a shy, slim fifth-grader. "We're not allowed to eat junk food or stuff like that."

Sandy-haired Timothy Mills, a fourth-grader, says the focus "just keeps us more fit, plus we have a lot more fun."

Like Mills, an earnest, heavy-set 9-year-old, Northeast kids aren't all skinny. Even some kindergartners are clearly overweight. But they still jump enthusiastically to the alphabet song, and though chubbier kids struggle to run around the football field during gym class, there doesn't seem to be much grumbling.

Physical education teacher Becky Burgoyne said it's sometimes tough to get kids of "all different shapes and sizes" to be physically active.

"I just ask that students do their best and improve on what they can already do," Burgoyne said.

Some schools "may have physical education twice a week, once a week, and that's not acceptable. Children need to move," she said. "To have a healthy body is to have a healthy brain and therefore they become better at reading and math and science. It all works together."

The students mostly mirror Danville and surrounding Vermilion County - generally poorer, less healthy than the state average, with many families struggling with obesity and related problems.

The percentage of overweight kids at Northeast increased in 2009, the program's third year, but dropped slightly last year, to 32 percent; 17 percent are obese. Those are similar to national figures, Principal Cheryl McIntire said. With only three years of data, it's too soon to call the slight dip in the percentage of overweight children a trend. But she considers it a promising sign, and there's no question that the children are learning healthy habits.

In a recent math class, fifth grade teacher Lisa Unzicker explained how food labels can be misleading by listing only calories per serving, not per container. Pointing to an image of a pretzel bag label projected on a screen at the front of the classroom, she taught students to figure out how many calories are in a whole bag, based on the amount in each serving.

You have to be careful about potato chips and candy bars, she told the class. "This is why it pays to be a very conscious consumer."

Teachers and parents credit McIntire for the school's success. The principal joined Northeast in 2008, a year after the staff moved to adopt the healthy focus, and has made it her mission to instill that mantra.

McIntire literally "walks the walk." When students need a talking-to, she walks to their classrooms and escorts them to and from her office rather than just messaging for them. When it's her turn for recess duty, she walks with her pedometer around the school's big field instead of standing on the sidelines. She recalls a student recently calling out, "Hey, Mrs. McIntire, are you doing your steps?"

McIntire is closely involved with choosing school menus and secured money from the state and local school district that have paid for fresh produce, including things like kiwi fruit that many children have never seen before.

A recent lunch menu featured whole-grain, reduced-fat cheese pizza, broccoli and cauliflower buds, sweet corn, chilled pears, low-fat pudding, and 1 percent low-fat milk.

McIntire has changed her own eating habits, giving up potato chips and shedding 15 pounds since last year.

Tall, slender and a youthful 56, McIntire guides Northeast with a firm but loving hand. She greets students by name each morning, helps with untied shoelaces, and offers hugs. And she scolds kids who have messy uniforms or are rude to their classmates.

School hallways feature signs about good food choices and being healthy, and a poster about the Alliance's gold award is prominently displayed near the school office.

The Alliance established a Healthy Schools' program in 2006, with

funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It helps schools that want to become healthier and meet alliance criteria for winning medals. More than 500 schools have won bronze and silver awards. Those gold medals are tougher to come by. Memorial High School in West New York, N.J., was the first school in the country ever to win a gold. Last year, Northeast became the first elementary school to do that. Rio Hondo Elementary in suburban Los Angeles is the latest to win it.

Ginny Ehrlich, chief executive officer for the Alliance for a Healthier Generation says of Northeast, "They truly stand out." The school has done a remarkable job of making "healthy eating and activity the norm."

Since Northeast is a magnet school, students have to apply to attend, although they don't need to test in. Besides committing to the healthy mindset, parents must volunteer 26 hours at the school each year.

"There certainly are people who are much more invested than others, but we have gotten so much positive feedback from parents," McIntire said.

In her first year, McIntire recruited students by posting advertisements in the local newspaper. "I don't need to do that anymore," she said. For the current school year, there were more than 80 applications for 48 kindergarten slots.

"We have people calling everyday wondering if their child can get in," she said.

Shelbi Black says Northeast has had an "amazing, life-altering" influence on her kids, 10-year-old Kayla and Carter, 5. They've come home requesting fruits and vegetables they used to reject. Carter was thrilled to make frozen fruit shish kebobs in school, and Kayla "was so excited the other day because she made her goal in running the mile and she was so happy that she knocked down her time from last year," Black said.

Tim Mills' mom, Charlyn Hester, says since the school adopted the healthy program, her family has switched from eating lots of convenience foods to lean grass-fed beef and lots of fruits and vegetables. Her oldest daughter, a recent Northeast graduate, has slimmed down and Hester says she thinks Tim and his 11-year-old sister will, too. Hester herself has lost almost 100 pounds since 2009.

The family's grocery bills are higher, but Hester, a freelance writer, says she and her husband, a security officer, have decided it's worth spending more on food and forgoing things like a new car, for their kids' health.

"It's not necessarily a financial hardship, but it's certainly an investment," she said.

Health department officials say they have not calculated obesity rates for children in Danville and the county. Psychologist Richard Elghammer, who works with a large rural health clinic in Danville, says about one-third of the kids treated there are overweight or obese - similar to the national average. National data suggest that the county's obesity rate alone for adults, about 32 percent, is also similar to the national average. About two-thirds of adults are overweight.

But Vermilion County rates of obesity-related illness including heart disease are higher, and more than 80 percent of county residents don't eat government-recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables, according to national surveys.

Dr. Thomas Halloran, an internist who treats adults in Danville, has been working to provide financial support and resources to Northeast, through his medical group, Carle Clinic. Halloran says many of his patients have diabetes and other illnesses tied to a lifetime of obesity and poor health habits. By instilling healthy habits in kids starting in kindergarten, the school is making an important contribution to the community's health,

Halloran said.

**More information:**

Alliance for a Healthier Generation: <http://www.healthiergeneration.org>

Northeast's Facebook page: <http://on.fb.me/oAutYo>

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