

CDC'S DIVISION OF COMMUNITY HEALTH SUCCESS STORIES

by: Linda J. Colangelo

Students Increase Physical Activity and Writing Skills in Northeastern Connecticut

SUMMARY

Through the HealthQuest WriteSteps School Walking Initiative, more than 4,400 students in 9 schools begin their day with a 10-minute walk and academic discussion. With the increased opportunity for physical fitness, northeastern Connecticut teachers have noted a decrease in the number of disciplinary referrals, improvement in writing scores, and an increased percentage of students passing the physical fitness test.



CHALLENGE

Childhood obesity is a growing epidemic in Connecticut. According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health, Connecticut has a 25.9% childhood obesity rate. Northeastern Connecticut's 41 schools serve as academic homes to more than 17,000 students. Because schools are increasing instructional time in math, English, and science in an attempt to improve standards-based test scores, physical education classes, recess, and

physical activity breaks are shortened or taken away. According to CDC's 2010 report, *The Association Between School Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance*, "There is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores." Public health partners are working to increase physical activity to improve overall student health and academic performance.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

Walking provides immeasurable health benefits and is one of the few physical activities that you can do for life. Allowing students to have multiple opportunities for physical activity during their school day not only instills a healthy lifetime behavior, but is shown to improve academic performance. Join the movement to become a healthier school by implementing the HealthQuest WriteSteps School Walking Initiative.

"Healthy learners achieving academic excellence...that's the vision, and every time a school adopts the HealthQuest WriteSteps School Walking Initiative as their school policy, we're one step closer to bringing the vision to life."

- Susan Starkey, Director of Health

SOLUTION

In 2009 HealthQuest Northeast Connecticut, a public health collaborative of the Northeast District Department of Health, worked with national walking expert Robert Sweetgall to launch the WriteSteps School Walking Initiative in two schools — Plainfield Memorial and Central Schools. To increase physical activity more than 1,000 students, school principals wrote the policy into the curriculum and student handbooks. Students and school staff start the day with a 10-minute walk. For added instructional value, students discuss an academic topic while walking and journal about it upon return to the classroom.

RESULTS

Since the launch of the HealthQuest WriteSteps School Walking Initiative, Plainfield School data results include the decrease of disciplinary referrals, improvement in writing scores, and the significant percentage increase of students passing the physical fitness component of the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT). Additionally, teachers who initially expressed hesitation about "trying to fit one more thing into the school day" now enthusiastically embrace the initiative. In fact, in 2011, teachers requested that annual CMTs not commence until students had taken their morning walk. Building upon this initial success, the WriteSteps Initiative has grown to include 9 schools and more than 4,400 elementary school children are getting an extra 50 minutes of physical activity each week. Student testimonials include comments such as "The morning walk gets the stress out of me," and "I think better!"

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The findings and conclusions in this success story are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the funding agencies or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

HealthQuest Northeast Connecticut (HQ) Coalition partners envision an education culture where all those involved in the educational process value strategies that support healthy learners; and recognize that physical activity and improved nutrition are vital to achieving academic excellence. Implementing the WriteSteps School Walking Initiative in additional schools is the goal for HQ. To advance this initiative, HQ partners will work with interested parents, Boards of Education, school administrators, and students. As funding allows, the coalition will support the initiative by providing educational presentations, walk rallies, and pedometers to schools.

