

AMERICA'S HEALTHIEST SCHOOLS

TAKE A TOUR OF MESA PUBLIC SCHOOLS'
HEALTHY SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

In Arizona's Mesa Public Schools, health is happening around every corner. Seventeen of the district's schools earned a spot on the 2016 list of America's Healthiest Schools, and building on their success, another 30 schools joined them in 2017—the most of any district in the country.

It all began with a chance meeting at a conference between Deb Pangrazi, the district's elementary physical education (PE) department specialist, and Lisa Perry, a national physical education and activity advisor at the Alliance for a Healthier Generation several years ago.

"We thought: How can we bridge the gap for our students who are in greatest need? We decided the best thing we could do for them was to create an active, healthy school," said Deb. She shared her goal with Lisa, and the two kept in touch. When Deb returned from the conference, she recommitted to the Healthy Schools Program process, with support from Lisa and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

Take a tour of the district's campuses, and you'll see what they've been able to accomplish.

First Stop: Fuel Up with Healthy School Meals

The tour kicks off by walking onto a Mesa Public Schools campus first thing in the morning to see what's on the menu for breakfast. "We want to know that every single child has a good breakfast to start the day off right," said Deb. Currently, 72 out of 78 schools are serving breakfast—a big shift from the 30 or so schools that offered breakfast when Food and Nutrition Director Loretta Zullo joined the district.

Loretta and her staff have experimented with different formats for serving breakfast, from grab-and-go to breakfast in the classroom. "Breakfast in the classroom has been a great success. It removes any and all barriers for kids to start their day with breakfast, such as coordinating bus schedules or getting dropped off late," said Loretta.

At lunch time, swing by the cafeteria to see how the district is applying 'Smarter Lunchroom' techniques. White milk now trumps flavored milk, and whole fruits and vegetables are easier for students to grab quickly. In secondary schools, food service staff noticed that students were less likely to choose fresh fruits and vegetables if they weren't wrapped in packaging (due to sanitary concerns), so the district invested in packaging equipment and has seen the selection of these healthy snacks increase.

MESA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

30

schools earned
the National Healthy
Schools Award
in 2017

Serving
approximately

64K

students

ALLIANCE FOR A
HEALTHIER
GENERATION

#HEALTHIESTSCHOOLS

“A HUNGRY CHILD CAN’T LEARN. That’s why school meals are an integral part of the school day. Better quality, better nutrition—that’s what we do here.” — Loretta Zullo, Food and Nutrition Director



Elementary schools also enjoy a “harvest of the month” promotion, which features an unusual fresh fruit or vegetable such as kale salad or squash. Loretta sees a direct relationship between the cafeteria’s efforts and the students’ ability to succeed in school. “A hungry child can’t learn,” said Loretta, “That’s why school meals are an integral part of the school day. Better quality, better nutrition—that’s what we do here.”

Next Stop: Active Learning Environments

The tour continues to see how Mesa Public Schools are complementing their nutritious meals with a healthy dose of movement.

Peek into the gymnasium, and you’ll see a flurry of activity; the PE department’s goal is to keep students active while they’re in class. To accomplish this, each lesson is broken into four parts starting with a warm-up activity, followed by fitness development and skills training, and concluding with an active game.

Elementary students have PE twice a week for thirty minutes. Their classes are taught by certified physical education professionals and are never combined to ensure that the student-to-teacher ratio is manageable and students get the support they need to feel successful. Instructors aim to provide a variety of activities so that

every child can find something that he or she enjoys, including tennis, golf or rock climbing. “We’re making PE a place where kids want to come to learn how to be active and healthy,” said Deb.

Next, stop by the playground during recess to witness students demonstrating the skills they learned in PE. Recess, too, offers something for everyone, beyond traditional sports such as football or basketball. Students can choose from bowling, hula-hoops, jump rope or four square. Elementary schools offer 20 minutes of recess during lunch, and some even offer an additional 15-minute period, either in the morning or afternoon.

Even when they’re in class, students stay active. Twice a day for at least five minutes, students participate in physical activity breaks, which have been shown to help restore attention and improve retention of academic lessons.

Celebrate Success in Creating a Healthier School Day

The district was thrilled to learn that its hypothesis was true: the changes it made—from the gymnasium to the cafeteria to the playground—are having a positive impact on students’ wellbeing and performance.

In 2008, researchers from Arizona State University and the Arizona Department of Education concluded an evaluation of the efficacy of these programs. “They found a decrease in disruptive behavior during the day because kids are more active, a decrease in nurse visits, and an increase in attendance. Our test scores were maintained, despite adding more activity during the school day,” summarized Deb.

Those results, in addition to the 30 National Healthy Schools Awards Mesa Public Schools received this year, ensure that the district’s commitment to health is here to stay.

“We’re making PE a place where kids want to come to learn how to be active and healthy.”

—Deb Pangrazi, Elementary Physical Education Department Specialist