



AMERICA'S HEALTHIEST SCHOOLS

SAINT LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS ENSURE ALL STUDENTS
HAVE A HEALTHY SCHOOL DAY

Saint Louis Public Schools serve more than 26,000 students over a vast geographic area that hugs the Mississippi River on the eastern border of the state.

Students from the surrounding urban neighborhoods face numerous challenges to staying healthy: research shows that students who live in low-income communities are more likely to be food insecure, experience academic achievement gaps, and have fewer opportunities to be physically active. In Saint Louis Public Schools, 100 percent of students in the district receive free or reduced-price meals.

As stated in the district's core beliefs, "The Saint Louis Public Schools are obligated to help students overcome any obstacles that may hinder their learning by forming partnerships with the entire community." It's this collaborative spirit and commitment to overcoming obstacles that has enabled the district to find success through the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program, supporting five schools in achieving National Healthy Schools Awards in 2017.

Healthy Schools Program Provides a Framework for Improving Wellness

In 2015, the district began working closely with Healthy Schools Program Manager Terry Atteberry. "They were looking to update their policies, but didn't know how to drive change in the right direction," said Terry. "I helped them identify the areas where they needed to focus."

With Terry's direction and additional support from the Missouri Foundation for Health's Healthy Schools Healthy Communities grant, the district hit the ground running. At the helm was Project Director and Supervisor for K-12 Health and Physical Education Leanne White, a former physical education and health teacher. "Initially, our teachers thought it was just another thing they were going to have to do," said Leanne. "But once we took that one leap of faith with Terry, we understood that this work was totally worth it."

Saint Louis Students Are Drinking Water, Moving More and Eating Better

When the district detected lead in some of its aging pipes, installing refillable water stations on school campuses became a top priority to ensure students had access to safe drinking water at school. "Through a grant, we purchased water bottles for students, and we created a district-wide policy that allowed students to keep their water bottles with them," said Leanne. "The district helped pick up the costs for the installation of the stations, and even the health commissioner for the city of Saint Louis came on board. They purchased additional stations for some of our middle and high schools."

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Getting students moving more throughout the school day was also a priority. Academics in Movement (or AIM), the district’s physical education and health curriculum, inspired the creation of “AIM zones.” These fitness hubs include pedal exercisers, stability balls, and other equipment that students can use during the school day to increase their activity levels or refocus their attention.

Some schools are also creating walking trails, both in and outside the school building to keep kids moving. Gateway Michael School is one of two schools in the district that serves students with serious health problems and disabilities. Assistant Principal Petra Baker wanted her students to experience the benefits of walking, too, so she collaborated with the neighboring middle and elementary schools to map out a quarter-mile walking trail. “When we first started walking with the other kids, our students trailed behind; they didn’t want to be seen because many of them use walkers or wheelchairs,” said Petra. “But now, they’re interacting with the other kids—the walking club has helped to build their confidence.”

The district’s food service program got an overhaul, too. Food Service Director Althea Albert-Santiago conducted surveys and focus groups with both students and parents to collect information about

dietary preferences and needs. Using that feedback, she and her staff added more salad bars, grab-and-go breakfast carts, and more vegetarian options to schools’ menu offerings. Several schools even opted to plant gardens on their campuses, incorporating garden activities into science and nutrition education curricula. “Students have an opportunity to learn about growing their own food, which they haven’t been exposed to before, living in an urban area,” said Leanne.

Bottom Line: Healthy Students Come to School More Often

Why go to these lengths to create a healthier school day? According to Leanne White, it’s simple. “If a child’s stomach is empty or they have low energy, why would they want to come to school?” she asks. “Bottom line: when you create an atmosphere that’s more fun than sitting at a desk, students will go to school more. We can actually show that we’ve had an increase in attendance at schools where we’ve added brain breaks.”

Principal Baker agrees. She knows the benefits of making healthy changes firsthand: when her district started focusing on health, she did, too. She’s lost more than 70 pounds so far. “Before I lost the weight, I couldn’t walk as much as I wanted to and I tired easily,” she said. “If we don’t address our children’s health problems now, they’re going to have grave complications in adulthood. The healthier we are as children, the healthier we will be as adults.”

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