



AMERICA'S HEALTHIEST SCHOOLS

BIRTHDAY HATS, ZOMBIE RUNS, OH MY! HEALTHY CREATIVITY IS NO STRANGER TO THIS OKLAHOMA SCHOOL

"Here in Oklahoma, our health statistics are pretty horrible. That's why it's so important that our kids learn how to take good care of themselves when they're young," said Karen Cook, principal of Lincoln Elementary School in Pryor, Oklahoma, one of the more than 300 schools to earn a spot on list of America's Healthiest Schools in 2017.

In fact, in Oklahoma more than 17 percent of kids between the ages of 10–17 are obese, making it the fourteenth most obese state for children in America. At Lincoln Elementary School, nearly 40 percent of students are also Native American, which statistically puts them at increased risk for a variety of negative health outcomes later in life.

Karen and her staff set out to improve their students' chances of living a healthy, prosperous life by joining the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program in 2011. "The research is pretty clear about how important it is to be physically fit and to move. It has a direct correlation with their academics," said Karen. "If you don't feel well or you're tired, how are you going to learn?"

Parents and Strong Wellness Policies Support a Culture of Health

Karen feels fortunate that Lincoln Elementary is part of Pryor School District, a district that has been proactive in adopting a strong district wellness policy since 2010. Wellness policies help to set the tone for the culture of health at school. For example, the district's policy states that schools should not remove physical activity as punishment for poor behavior or reward students using food.

Parents also play an important role in supporting the school's health initiatives. Each month, Lincoln offers Habits to Ensure Successful Parenting (or HESP) meetings where parents can learn new ways to continue the school's healthy messages at home, and parents and their children enjoy a healthy meal together.

A Running Start to a Healthier School Day

Active fundraisers have replaced food-based fundraisers at Lincoln Elementary. Each year, the school hosts a jog-a-thon in September, which serves as both a fundraiser and another way to engage parents and community members in the school's health initiatives. "For a week, kids get pledges and keep track of how much they walk or run. On Thursday night we have a family night where we invite parents to come to school to walk or jog with their kids, too, and we serve water and a healthy snack," explained Karen.

The event was so popular that the school also added a "Zombie Run" in October where parents and students run together in a park near the school. High school students dress up like zombies and join in the active fun.

LINCOLN ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL, PRYOR PUBLIC
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Serving
765
STUDENTS
(approximately)

Enrolled in the
Healthy Schools
Program since
2011

ALLIANCE FOR A
**HEALTHIER
GENERATION**



#HEALTHIESTSCHOOLS

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To help students build endurance for these events, Lincoln Elementary School participates in the 100 Mile Club, a before-school running and walking club where students track their mileage throughout the year. Students are also encouraged to participate in the Wings Fitness Program, a walking and running club started by the Cherokee nation, which welcomes all students whether they have Cherokee heritage or not.

Building a Healthier School Happens One Step at a Time

Despite the district’s strong wellness policy, Karen and her staff still—at first—received pushback from some parents when implementing the healthy snacking policy. “We’ve been so indoctrinated to celebrate with food,” said Karen. “We just had to break that cycle.”

Teachers began to offer different types of incentives to celebrate kids’ birthdays such as extra recess time, or allowing students to wear a special hat to school on their birthday. “Now, our students love being able to pick their healthy celebrations,” said Karen.

She offers a final word of advice for any school looking to create a healthier learning environment for its students. “You’re going to have to take small steps and get buy-in to make change happen. It’s worth it. We know that doing things this way is better for our kids, and that’s what matters.”

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