

AMERICA'S HEALTHIEST SCHOOLS

FOR MCALLEN VS. MISSION, FRIENDLY COMPETITION PAYS OFF

Just a few miles separate McAllen and Mission school districts in South Texas; two districts that have united around their shared value that every student deserves a healthy school.

Together, these neighboring districts supported 22 schools in implementing healthy changes to earn the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's National Healthy Schools Awards in 2017 alone—and an impressive 54 schools since 2015!

What sets these districts apart is not only their close proximity to one another, but their geographic location, just north of the Mexico border in a region known as the Rio Grande Valley. This area is home to many immigrants that cross the border with few possessions or job prospects, leading to a population with many unmet needs. That's why it's so important that districts like McAllen and Mission are prioritizing kids' health at school, the place where kids spend the most time outside of the home.

In addition to poverty, students face other challenges to being healthy. "In our culture, you eat a big breakfast, big lunch and dinner, and anytime there's a party, there has to be a big cake," said Mario Reyna, McAllen's coordinator for health and physical education.

These school leaders know that a healthy school can make all the difference in students' chances of leading a healthy, productive life. "Research clearly indicates that when kids have more physical activity and education, academics are higher," said Mario. "Studies show that attendance and behavior is better when students are healthy. When you put those three together—those are goals of all educators."

McAllen School District Sets the Pace

Since 2014, Healthy Schools Program Manager Fancy Flores has supported McAllen in the district's quest to improve its school health policies and practices. While the district was already making great strides toward health, the Healthy Schools Program enabled school leaders to create a more active school day by ensuring that recess could not be withheld for punishment and students could not be removed from physical education class for academic reasons.

After achieving many of McAllen's wellness goals—all 32 of McAllen's eligible schools earned National Healthy Schools Awards in 2015—Mario became a school health ambassador to neighboring districts. "I got a call from Mission's School Health Advisory Council when they saw how well we were doing with regard to health in the newspaper," Mario remembers.

MCALLEN & MISSION, TEXAS
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

18

McAllen schools earned
the National Healthy
Schools Award
in 2017

4

Mission schools earned
the National Healthy
Schools Award
in 2017

ALLIANCE FOR A
**HEALTHIER
GENERATION**



#HEALTHIESTSCHOOLS

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At the superintendent’s request, Mario gave a presentation to the council, challenging the district to join McAllen in building a culture of health at school. “I told them why they needed to join the Healthy Schools Program. It’s so comprehensive—the Program covers physical activity, nutrition, staff wellness and policy change. Helping us change our policies has made a huge difference to our district!”

Mission Joins McAllen on the Path to School Health

The pitch worked: Superintendent Dr. Lopez met with Fancy to talk about enrolling all 22 of Mission’s schools in the Program, too. Under Mario’s recommendation, Mission School District created a new position, physical education and health coordinator for the district, to oversee implementation. They hired Lety Ibarra for the job.

To kick off its healthy school transformation, the district sought to update its wellness policy, which would provide a framework to implement all health-related policies and practices. Lety reached out to neighboring districts, including McAllen, to see examples of their wellness policies and Fancy shared Healthier Generation’s Model Wellness Policy template for the district to use as a guide.

During the 2015-16 school year, the school health advisory committee, with guidance from Fancy, customized the Model Wellness Policy to their specific needs. With resounding support from Dr. Lopez, the policy was

formally adopted at the June 2016 school board meeting, though many schools were already well on their way to implementing the changes. In fact, within two years of enrolling in the Program, Mission, too, has all of its eligible schools earn National Healthy Schools Awards!

TEAM Stands for Together Everyone Achieves More

Now, both districts are looking toward maintaining their progress and sustaining the momentum. In the next school year, they will encourage schools to continue to find ways to incorporate wellness into the school day through increased minutes of physical activity and education, and by ensuring all foods served and sold at school meet national standards. For example, starting in fall 2017, fourteen of Mission’s elementary schools will be adding 20 minutes of recess before lunch and prohibiting the use of food as an incentive or reward across all campuses.

National Healthy Schools Awards are offered at Bronze, Silver and Gold levels—and these school leaders have their eye on the (golden) prize. In fact, Marcell Elementary in Mission and Woodrow Wilson Elementary in McAllen were two of just ten schools in the country to earn the National Healthy Schools Gold Award in 2017.

No matter what lies ahead, both Lety and Mario agree that their efforts are stronger—and their students healthier—when they work together.

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—Mario Reyna, McAllen’s Health and Physical Education Coordinator