

Schools tackle obesity issue through nutrition

By ANNE KLOCKENKEMPER, STAFF WRITER

During a recent lunch period at Glenallen Elementary in North Port, third-grader Kylie Mesecar, 9, grabbed both a fruit cup & a cup of raw vegetables to go with the roll & serving of spaghetti & meat sauce on her lunch tray. "I like it every day," she said of her healthy choices. Behavior like Kylie's is what area school districts are trying to encourage in an effort to improve children's nutrition & to combat childhood obesity, which is a problem not just locally, but around the nation.

The Florida Department of Health's website states that obesity, not just for children but also for adults, is the fastest rising public health problem in the nation, & second only to tobacco use. Over the last two decades, it states the percentage of overweight children has almost doubled & the percentage of overweight adolescents has nearly tripled.

Obesity is defined, by the Charlotte County Health Department, as ranges of weight that are greater than what is generally considered healthy for a given height. The terms also identify ranges of weight that have been shown to increase the likelihood of certain diseases & other health problems, including high blood pressure, high levels of LDL (bad cholesterol), low HDL (good cholesterol), or high triglycerides, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, certain cancers, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis & breathing problems.

In Feb., first lady Michelle Obama launched a national initiative called "Let's Move!" The program, which established a national task force on childhood obesity, is targeted to bring an end to the problem within a generation. According to letsmove.gov, the program hopes to help parents make healthy choices for their children - & themselves - by eating more fruits & vegetables. It also is aimed to help children become more physically active, & assist families by making healthy, affordable food available in every part of the country. According to the Sarasota County School District, more than 40% of 6th-graders in the county are obese or overweight. About 35% of 3rd- & 9th-graders in the county fall into the same category.

Area school districts are already tackling the problem, primarily through nutrition. All schools are required to follow the Dietary Guidelines for America, which recommend that not more than 30 percent of an individual's calories come from fat, & less than 10 percent come from saturated fat. Regulations also say school lunches must provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium & calories. School lunches must meet federal nutrition requirements, but decisions about what specific foods to serve & how they are prepared are made by local school food authorities. Beverly Girard, Sarasota County School District's director of food & nutrition services, recently attended a legislative conference in Washington, D.C., where Obama was the speaker. Girard was impressed with how much support the administration is giving to the topic. She said the district is always on the lookout for ways to help students be healthier. They're also watching out for new ideas, or grant funding, to come from the national initiative that can be implemented locally. Sarasota County schools have access to five registered dieticians. One of them is Karla Pignotti Dumas, who described the district's "Go, Slow, Whoa" program for school menus. In place since 2007, the menus are colorcoded to help students, especially those at the elementary level, make healthier choices.

Items in green represent "Go" or healthy options — low in fat, sodium & calories, filled with nutrients & rich in vitamins & minerals. Yellow or "Slow" food are somewhat higher in fat content, have more sodium & calories & should be eaten less frequently than "Go" foods. "Whoa" foods are printed in red, warning students to pause before eating them. They are highest in fat, sodium & calories, lowest in nutrients & should only be consumed in moderation.

Pignotti Dumas said she regularly visits school campuses to teach students about healthy eating. "I'll do vegetable-tasting parties where I bring things in on a platter," she said, adding she also works to get students moving around the classroom so there is an exercise component as well. "I've had parents call in & say that their kids are asking for vegetables that they have never been able to get them to eat before." Due to grant funding, Sarasota County students at 10 schools mostly those that have a large percent of students on free or reduced lunch, which includes North Port's Glenallen & Lamarque elementary schools also have been able to receive a free snack of a fruit or vegetable every day. "Through the program, students have tried new things like starfruit, kiwi & papaya, as well as some of the more traditional ones," Pignotti Dumas said.

Charlotte County schools have Champs Cafe, which also encourages healthy eating. The wellness policy encourages families to continue healthy habits at home by offering fruits & vegetables as snacks & with meals to increase vitamins & minerals, & by encouraging more physical activity. "I think that we've been ahead of the game in Charlotte County because we have already tried to select the high-nutrient produce," said Terri Whitacre, director of school food service for the Charlotte County school district. "We offer two vegetable choices & ask them to take two, because we know they're so packed with nutrients." Whitacre said it doesn't end with extra veggies. The school district also gets to decide what a la carte items to serve. "& we watch portion size, sodium & much more.," Whitacre said. Both Charlotte & Sarasota schools require daily recess for elementary school students & encourage activity outside of school for older students. Physical activity is also one of the pillars of the first lady's program. "The district has been very proactive," Whitacre said, "not only with physical education classes, but by making equipment & parks available for families, & providing structured physical activity, so students aren't just at recess, but are actually walking using pedometers." Like Girard, Whitacre is hopeful about what the national initiative could mean locally. "We've been very excited to think that more dollars might come our way," she said.

In July, the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, which funds school lunch programs, will be renewed. "It's difficult to pack a healthy lunch from home, but also difficult to afford paying \$2 to \$3 per meal per day, so the challenge weighs on all our minds," Whitacre said. "We see what children have in their lunches from home. Sometimes I think they pack their lunch, or I wonder is that all they have in the house that day? That's why we encourage families to apply for meal benefits. In our district, we have almost 60 percent economically needy. But it's not just here. It's a mirror of the entire nation."

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