Wellness Unites Students, Employees at Richmond, VA’s Collegiate School

**Issue:** A University of Michigan study showed that children and teens spend about 32.5 hours a week in school during their most formative years, when many lifelong habits develop. What are they learning that will most beneficially impact their adult lives? While the short- and long-term benefits of health and physical education classes are well-documented, those subjects seldom get priority in a crowded curriculum; in fact, some schools even cut into the recommended PE minutes (150 per week for elementary; 225 for middle and high school) to devote more time to other classes.

But what if wellness could be woven into the school culture throughout the day in innovative ways — with teachers, staff and students teaming up to inspire, encourage and help each other develop good eating, exercise and sleeping habits? It may sound like a utopian ideal, but at the independent K-12 Collegiate School in Richmond, VA, the “wellness bug” that caught on more than 12 years ago has positively infected the entire 1,600-student, 425-staff school community.

**SHAPE America** – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Let’s Move! Active Schools (now Active Schools) and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.

**The Big Idea:** It all started with a Wellness Day hosted by Collegiate’s Middle School physical education department in the spring of 2005. In place of regular classes, fifth-through eighth-graders rotated through a variety of stations and activities, such as nutrition, Ultimate Frisbee, a Navy SEAL Team workout, stress management, kickboxing and more. Wellness Day was so popular that physical education teachers and SHAPE America members Kathy Wrenn and Amanda Cowgill began seeking ways to keep the ball rolling.

In 2008, using $2,000 from a summer professional development grant awarded by Collegiate, Wrenn and Cowgill created a wellness program called Link It & Live It, emphasizing the connection between sleep, healthful eating and physical activity. The program was modeled after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model. Collegiate’s Middle School program was led by seventh- and eighth-grade student “wellness teams,” consisting of four girls and four boys. Next, they targeted the Lower School, empowering all fourth graders to be wellness ambassadors for the lower grades.

In her new role as the school’s wellness coordinator, Wrenn, a 17-year teaching veteran, realized the critical role that teachers and staff could play as positive role models for students. And Collegiate’s Human Resources Department agreed. It reached out and began an ongoing relationship with the school’s insurance provider Cigna, who provides financial and consulting support for the employee wellness program.

“If employees could use all those hours spent at work to adopt and promote healthful habits, then I knew we could create a whole community of wellness-minded people,” says Wrenn.

**Implementation:** Thus began an American Heart Association Gold Award-winning incentive program that now is one of the school’s selling features when recruiting new...
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“One boy saw his teacher wearing a pedometer and got his dad to buy a set for his class,” says Wrenn. Robby Turner, the kindergarten teacher who started the challenge in 2012, used pedometers in his math lessons to encourage students to “get the wiggles out” — and to educate parents during parent-teacher conferences. When a retired school mail carrier had a heart attack, staff and students created a walking group, “Team Ray,” to help him meet his post-recovery fitness goals.

The Link It & Live It nutrition component is equally robust. Students build activities around the comprehensive “Fantastic Five” nutrition education program, developed in conjunction with Aladdin, the school’s food service provider. Superhero characters Victor Veggie, Gracie Grain, Frankie Fruit, Danny Dairy and Priscilla Protein may pop up in the classroom, science curriculum, cafeteria, assemblies and handouts, including healthful-recipe cards.

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Takeaway: Is a program like Link It & Live It viable for a public school setting? Wrenn believes it is, provided there is “someone to drive the bus” and ambassadors to support it. “The whole school community needs to embrace it,” she says. “But I want people to know it doesn’t happen overnight. I had to learn patience by starting with one piece and gradually getting more and more people on board. I never gave up.”

Wrenn says that many school insurance companies may offer financial assistance for an employee wellness program, but someone must apply for the assistance and run the program.

Results: Since Link It & Live It became part of the school culture, Collegiate’s faculty and staff have observed increased employee productivity, morale and retention, as well as reduced absenteeism and medical claims.

An estimated 65 percent of employees actively log on to the portal and collect their $75 credit in “Wellness Bucks” that can be used for health screenings, individual dietitian visits, race and health club fees, weight-loss programs and fitness-tracking devices. Motivated and inspired by their own results, teachers incorporate fitness and wellness components into various parts of the school day, from “active learning” in the classroom to fitness “brain boosters” to playing games while studying for tests. The wellness curriculum is adapted to grade levels. Wrenn says that middle and high school activities — including basketball tournaments, jump rope contests, and mini-Olympics — are largely student-driven, which also helps develop leadership skills.

Link It & Live It has created such a palpable excitement about wellness and a sense of community within the school that even many parents have hopped on the bandwagon — walking with their kids after school and preparing healthy dishes together. “Health and wellness has connected the entire school community in very positive ways,” says Wrenn.

If you’d like to know more about the Collegiate wellness program contact Kathy Wrenn at kwrenn@collegiate-va.org.