**Issue:** As *Time* magazine pointed out in a past issue devoted to health, “The road to wellness begins in childhood and twists and turns over time.” But where do children learn the tools for navigating this winding road and its unseen pitfalls?

If parents are not successful navigators themselves, it’s unlikely they will teach their children the skills needed to maintain physical and mental health — including nutritious eating, weight control, personal safety, safety prevention skills, tobacco-use deterrence, stress control, disease prevention and management, emotional and social health, and alcohol and drug abuse prevention.

That leaves a big job for schools — and one that many districts are taking seriously. New Canaan Public Schools in Connecticut is one of the districts that is transforming the way it approaches health education to ensure that students get the skills they need for lifelong wellness.

**The Big Idea:** “The New Canaan Public Schools established a district goal to review the district’s health curriculum two years ago and formed a research action committee to review and analyze it to identify any gaps there might be,” says Jonathan Adams, SHAPE America member and K-8 health and physical education coordinator in the New Canaan Public Schools (NCPS).

In addressing state mandate’s, the committee identified that the district needed to provide health education at the elementary level. “Personal safety was identified as one of the gaps in the third and fourth grades,” says Adams.

**Implementation:** Beginning in the 2019-20 school year, NCPS’s three elementary schools will pilot a grade 3-4 health curriculum that focuses on teaching communication and decision-making skills to ensure personal safety.

“Giving knowledge isn’t enough — there is no guarantee that students will apply that knowledge in various situations,” says Adams, who taught health education and adaptive PE at NCPS for eight years before taking over as health and physical education coordinator two years ago. “Skills are critical.”

The acronym deconstructs the decision-making process into five components:

- Give thought as you identify each scenario.
- Review/brainstorm your options.
- Evaluate the outcome of each.
- Assess each one and choose the best option.
- Think it over afterward. Would you make the same decision next time?

While developing the unit and lessons, the health education teachers take a backwards design approach and use curriculum resources from SHAPE America as well as two books: *The Essentials of Teaching Health Education* and *Lesson Planning for Skills-Based Health Education*, both by Sarah Benes and Holly Alperin.
The lessons will include “carpet time,” when the third- and fourth-graders gather on the floor to review what they’ve learned before going off to practice its implementation. The lessons will align to the National Health Education Standards. As the curriculum continues to develop, lessons will address sexual assault and abuse prevention, drug awareness and prevention, healthy eating, childhood injuries, seat belt and pedestrian safety, healthy relationships, disease prevention, saying no to dares, and other critical topics.

“We also will give all the lessons and materials to the classroom teachers to embed and integrate into other content areas,” Adams says. “The idea is to reinforce the skills by having students ‘live’ them throughout the year.”

**Results:** Although NCPS’s pilot program doesn’t launch until next year, Adams views the district’s growing health education program as a tangible success. “We have identified gaps and are implementing state mandates with overwhelming support from parents, the community, and the administration,” he says. “We’ve seen a lot of movement in a very short period of time.”

The elementary school pilot will help round out the district’s programs already in place for older students. Currently NCPS fifth-graders can become TV “news anchors,” reporting news segments on various health issues. They get to be filmed in front of a green screen, backed by footage and images of statistics and prevention steps on their chosen topic.

In addition, high school students research health topics to present to elected “government officials,” which includes writing grants for hypothetical $100,000 programs designed to address societal issues such as underage drinking and drug use. “They put their health knowledge into action, as they learn how to access valid and reliable information, write grants, work in groups, and present their cases to groups in written and verbal form,” says Adams.

**Takeaway:** The district believes it is never too early to teach students the skills they need to improve their health literacy and foster the capability to make informed decisions.

“The idea is to reinforce the skills by having students ‘live’ them throughout the year,” says SHAPE America member and K-8 health and physical education coordinator Jonathan Adams.

SHAPE America’s Appropriate Practices in School-Based Health Education

- Creating a positive and inclusive learning environment that engages students in learning the skills they need to live healthy lives
- Implementing a sequential, comprehensive curriculum — aligned with the National Health Education Standards and other relevant frameworks — that is skills-based, with an emphasis on developing health literacy
- Employing instructional practices that engage students in learning and in developing their health-related skills
- Using assessments that measure student growth, knowledge and health-related skill development
- Advocating for a positive school culture toward health and health education

50 Million Strong by 2029 is SHAPE America’s commitment to put all children on the path to health and physical literacy through effective health and physical education programs. Across the country, HPE teachers and other supporters are making an impact by taking action in the following areas:

- Effective Instruction
- Healthy Behaviors & Physical Activity
- Advocacy

Want to know how you can make an impact? Learn more at shapeamerica.org/50million.