Sugar-Free Zone

How principal Yvonne Sanders-Butler put reading, writing and healthy eating in her school's curriculum

February 22, 2007 By Rod McCullom

In 1998, after only a few weeks on the job, principal Yvonne Sanders-Butler, PhD, noticed something disturbing at Browns Mill Elementary School, in Lithonia, Georgia. "I remember walking through the lunchroom seeing so many obese students," she recalls. "I feared that some parents might end up burying their children."

Sanders-Butler, 49, was no stranger to obesity's perils. In 1996, after years of indulging in fatty foods, she was rushed to the hospital on the verge of having a stroke. "I could have died," she says. Instead, she joined Overeaters Anonymous and began eating healthfully and exercising. She shed 55 pounds, and her blood pressure fell.

Not wanting her students to share her fate, Sanders-Butler banned all processed sugar, making the predominantly black school the very first sugar-free school in the U.S. She also nixed fatty foods from the cafeteria's menu—out went chicken nuggets, pizza and ice cream and in came turkey sandwiches on whole-grain bread, fresh fruit and soy milk. She implemented schoolwide morning stretches and health workshops and enhanced the physical education program.

With studies showing that 23% of black children are obese and that black kids disproportionately suffer from type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, Sanders-Butler felt her crusade was necessary. She notes that poor diet adversely affects "discipline, test scores, homework—you name it."

Once she relayed her concerns to parents, they pledged to serve fewer fatty foods at home. She enlisted lunchroom monitors and bus drivers to confiscate junk food and convinced area store owners to stock healthier fare.

Within months, discipline and attendance had improved, test scores had jumped 10% and students had lost weight. Since then, Sanders-Butler says, "Math and reading test scores have improved 28% to 30%," and discipline referrals have dropped by more than 25%. Hundreds of principals around the country have called, wanting to implement the same program.

In response, Sanders-Butler started her own wellness company, Ennovy (www.ennovyinc.com), has

written three books, including *Healthy Kids, Smart Kids* (Penguin Group), and is even exploring some television options.

“She gave me the incentive to eat smarter and lose a few pounds,” states Sabreen Jai, a 55-year-old Browns Mill math teacher. “Everyone was coming to class and boasting about what they ate or how much weight they lost. It’s been wonderful.”

CONFRONTING CAFETERIA CUISINE

Hold your kids’ school responsible

In 2006, Congress passed a law requiring that all schools have a nutrition and wellness policy. To help ensure that your children eat healthy food at school, ask for and review the cafeteria menu, making sure that grains, vegetables, fruits and natural juices are prominent. If you’re not satisfied, Sanders-Butler suggests discussing your concerns with your principal. If you’re still not satisfied, approach your PTA, local school council or school board. In the meantime, brown-bag it. Avoid processed lunch meats that are high in sodium, and add yogurts and raisins, which make healthy yet inexpensive snacks.

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