

New Beginnings Family Academy: Starting Preschoolers off Right

As Chief Strategy Officer at New Beginnings Family Academy (NBFA), Quentin Ball was eager to ensure that the Energy Balance needs of her students were being met both in school and home. Ball and her team faced many challenges when striving to achieve Energy Balance amongst the students, including the high cost of fresh foods and the naturally inclement weather in Connecticut. As such, Ball wanted to ensure nutrition was balanced with physical exertion, encouraging at least 60 minutes of daily activity and a balanced in-school diet.



By utilizing the Together Counts™ lesson plans, incorporating more fruits and vegetables, and implementing a plan to buy the needed equipment, including tricycles, foam mats, and hula-hoops, Ms. Ball was determined to improve the standards for her students. Ball set out to “instill in our littlest ones the best habits from day one” and made plans to use the Together Counts funding to purchase the needed equipment, resources, and foods to help make a healthy lifestyle a reality for each of her preschoolers.

Snapshot of New Beginnings Family Academy

School Overview	New Beginnings Family Academy is a tuition-free public charter school with 91% of the students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. 13% of the students receive special education services. NBFA’s student body is 98% Black and Hispanic and 2% Caucasian.
School Type	Public Charter School
Enrolment	470
Grade Levels	Pre-K- 8 th grade
Community Snapshot	Once an industrial hotspot, Bridgeport, Connecticut is now a primarily service-based job market. With a population of 144,229, as of a 2010 census, Bridgeport’s hospital and medical center are the major employers of the city. Fairfield County’s strategic location near ports, railroads and interstate crossings allow retail trade to thrive in the Bridgeport area.
SFTS Team	Quentin Ball, Chief Strategy Officer

Background

New Beginnings Family Academy's students live in a community of high-need. According to the 2013 census, the median per capita income in Bridgeport was \$20,132 a year, which is about 53% of the statewide level of income. More than 90% of the NBFA's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and about 18% of the Bridgeport population live below the poverty line. About 25% of those falling beneath the poverty line are under the age of 18.

Identifying the Need

With inconsistent opportunities for students to be active outside due to weather, Ball saw a need for more Energy Out options. Although the school recently acquired outdoor playground equipment, the cold, wet weather often prevents students from taking full advantage of the new purchases throughout the year.

To help students meet their *Energy In* needs, Ball believes the school needed to step in and provide healthy options for the many Bridgeport families for whom buying costly fresh foods is not a realistic prospect. Additionally, Ball believes lessons on nutrition and exercise will give the students useful information that can stay with them as they grow up.

Meeting the Need

Physical Activity

When New Beginnings Family Academy formed a plan for the Smart from the Start Awards, the goal was to strengthen the students' Energy Balance through changes to nutrition and physical activity. When developing the plan for their preschoolers, Ball and the other educators increased physical activity levels by incorporating Energy Balance Pre-K activities into their classrooms on a daily basis.

By being creative in how they introduced various types of activity into the classroom that can be utilized in all climates, being active became a fun learning experience for the students. For instance, NBFA taught dances from different cultures, allowing the students to learn more about the world while enjoying dance and movement.

Additionally, to ensure the students' two-month summer break from school didn't go to waste, Ball created activity kits for the outgoing preschool class to use at home, including hula hoops, a sand bucket and shovel, a jump rope, balls, and chalk for hopscotch and other games. The activity kits provided tools to keep the children physically engaged and capitalized on the

summer weather to improve physical fitness. Ball hoped that the Energy Balance lessons wouldn't be easily forgotten if the students were engaged with stimulating outdoor activities.

Nutrition

To complement the physical activity ideas mentioned above, NBFA implemented a number of changes to improve in-school nutrition.

An immediate intervention that Ball instituted was to provide the students with at least one additional serving of fruits and vegetables per day. Ball also built a vegetable garden that students use to grow and learn about various vegetables. Finally, Ball designed a themed snack program allowing students to create their own healthy snacks daily. Themes included using all of the foods groups, using all of the colors in the rainbow, and exploring new fruits and vegetables.

Looking Ahead

With the Smart from the Start Award grant, NBFA hopes to continue making a positive change in the school by teaching Energy Balance with the Smart from the Start Pre-K Curriculum.

To increase physical activity, the school plans to purchase indoor and outdoor equipment, such as tricycles, hoops, balls, preschool-sized nets, foam mats, and more. In addition to these one-time purchases, NBFA will use the grants funds to budget for more fruits and vegetables, family nutrition and activity nights at the school, and field trips. Field trips to the local Bridgeport Farmers' Market and local orchard have already been planned for Fall 2015. The Farmers' Market field trip will educate the classes on fresh produce, and provide an opportunity for the students to bring some of the healthy options home.

To engage parents, Ball plans to host Family Nutrition and Activity Nights to help the families of NBFA learn about what they can do to extend Energy Balance at home. She knows that when healthy, active lifestyles are taught at school and reinforced at home, real change can occur.

Ball also believes working with community partners are crucial to extending learning outside of the classroom. She anticipates visits to a local recreation and education center to have the students participate in activities led by the center's physical education teachers. Additionally, the NBFA school nurse and physical education teacher will form class discussions around what contributes to a healthy mind and body. They plan to introduce foods that are known to

strengthen cognitive health and development in children, as well as introduce creative ways the preschoolers can stay active.

With long-term success in mind, Ball recognizes that the changes at school need to be complemented by healthy lifestyles at home. Ball and the other educators hope the students' newfound knowledge of Energy Balance will translate to the home setting, and that families will also apply these tips and tools to make choices that will encourage holistic health and wellness. Ball knows these students will face health and wellness choices for the rest of their lives, but by instilling the importance of nutrition and physical activity early on, Ball believes NBFA's strategy "equips the students with healthy daily practices."

Ball noted that by addressing these critical issues early, the school is "excited to develop student learning in health and wellness. This knowledge will grow along with them through all their years at NBFA, in high school, and beyond."

