



Myrtle Beach Intermediate: Students Lead the Way Toward Wellness

Myrtle Beach Intermediate (MBI) is one of 26 elementary schools in the Horry County School District, a district that serves 280,000 children along the coastline of South Carolina. MBI and their student-led Healthy Challenge Team enlisted students, faculty, parents and local businesses to help them eat more fruits and vegetables and increase their physical activity minutes. Their efforts won grand prize in the Together Counts program's Find Your Balance Challenge.



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Myrtle Beach Intermediate (MBI) is one of 26 elementary schools in the Horry County School District, a district that serves 280,000 children along the coastline of South Carolina. Home of the Seahawks, MBI is attended by 688 students in grades 4-5. MBI is a Leadership Model school, part of a national program that teaches elementary students to be true leaders. As part of this program, MBI students set annual and quarterly academic and personal goals and they work to meet those goals using a model based on Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. This year, MBI students applied their leadership structure to the *Find Your Balance Challenge*. Starting with the development of a student-led, school-wide Healthy Challenge Team, the MBI community enlisted students, faculty, parents and local businesses to help them eat more fruits and vegetables and increase their physical activity minutes. As a result of their unique efforts, MBI was awarded this year's *Find Your Balance Challenge* grand prize.

Snapshot of Myrtle Beach Intermediate

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| Community Snapshot | Myrtle Beach is a major tourist destination along the South Atlantic seaboard of the United States, widely known for its beaches and golf courses. The city has a population of 27,109 and the average household income is \$35,698. Myrtle Beach residents are 67.8% white, 13.7% African American and 13.7% Hispanic. It's most common industries are accommodation and food service, construction, and retail trade. |
| School Type | Public |
| Enrollment | 688 |
| Grade levels | 4-5 |
| School overview | MBI is a schoolwide Title 1 School (for 2012-13) with 66% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch programs. 33% of students are white, 33% are African American, and 33% are from other cultures, predominantly Hispanic and Russian. |
| How Physical Education and Health are taught | MBI students have PE once per week for 45 minutes. Health is infused into the PE curriculum. |
| FYBC Team | Dana Penick, Principal Kimball Baker, Fourth Grade Teacher Coach K, Physical Education Teacher Student-led Healthy Challenge Team |



Background

When Myrtle Beach Intermediate’s principal Dana Penick saw the *Find Your Balance Challenge* grant come across her desk, she realized immediately that it fit within the school’s focus of “Healthy Habits and Happy Habits.” She went on to the “Together Counts” website and began researching what Energy Balance was and how she might be able to help students create a meaningful project that would meet the *Challenge* criteria.

For the MBI community, the concept of Energy Balance is particularly important. Many of MBI’s students are labeled homeless since they live in hotels during the non-tourist season or in multiple family dwellings where their families are not the primary owners. Some families have four adults and nine or ten kids living in one home. Getting regular exercise is not a priority and no one is really playing with many of these kids or showing them how to play together. “When we do home visits, we see many of our students hitting a ball in an asphalt parking lot. There are no bikes or organized sports or walking paths for these students,” says Penick. **“It’s so important for us to teach them about a lifestyle that they wouldn’t be exposed to otherwise. We want them to know that it’s okay if they don’t have fancy equipment. They can still stay active with whatever they have.”**



As a Leadership Model school, MBI empowers students to regularly set and meet classroom, academic, and personal goals. According to student leaders, MBI students “do everything as a family and practice habits.” Penick saw the *Challenge* as a good fit. She decided to form a student-led Healthy Challenge Team and she advertised and had students interview for leadership roles. “I became the sponsor and our school’s Healthy Challenge Team became the leaders,” she said. The Healthy Challenge team was made up of fourth and fifth graders so the whole school was represented. **“We took our time going through the first three lessons just so they could learn what Energy Balance was,” said Penick.** “We needed to find out the answers to three questions: What is our Energy Balance? Where are we doing things right? Where are we out of whack?” The lessons provided the perfect foundation. “Many lessons are either too babyish or too advanced for our students,” Penick said. “But these held the kids’ interest perfectly.”

The members of the Healthy Challenge team then went into different classrooms throughout the school and taught other students about Energy Balance. Finally, Principal Penick advertised the following challenge on one of the school’s walls: “What would you do with \$30,000 to help our school become a healthy school?” And that is how the project began.



The Need

MBI's Healthy Challenge Team spent a week surveying the student body to help them identify authentic needs on the food side and the activity side of the Energy Balance scale. Each member of the team wrote one question about food and one question about physical activity. Examples included: How many servings of fruit/vegetables do you eat each day? How many glasses of water do you drink each day? How many hours a week do you play inside or outside? How many hours a week do you play video games.

The results were surprising to many members of the Healthy Challenge Team. **Just 37% of MBI students were eating three to five servings of fruits and vegetables each day.** Some students said the only time they ate fruit was at school. On the activity side, students were only playing outside two to three times per week and for only one to two hours each time. However, they played video games for six to eight hours each

week. In other words, they played video games four times as much as they played outside each week. When the Healthy Challenge Team computed the data, the needs were in black and white.

MBI students were not getting enough outdoor play or eating enough fruits and vegetables.

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Ready. Set. Goal!

The next step was for the Healthy Challenge Team to design specific goals for the project. On the physical activity side, MBI had two goals. One was to increase the number of minutes of outdoor play for the whole school from 120 minutes per week to 480 minutes per week. The other goal was that 100% of students would participate.

On the food side, their goal was for MBI students to only choose vegetables or fruits for snack time for one week to increase the amount of daily fruit and vegetable servings.

These goals became the school-wide goals for all MBI students for the quarter.



The Plan



Once the goals were set, the Healthy Challenge Team got to work. They wrote letters to local businesses introducing the team, explaining their goals and asking for donations of fruits and vegetables. They also wrote letters to parents asking for healthy snacks to be sent to school. The team then met with the school nutrition staff and asked them to include two vegetable choices and two fruit choices on the lunch menu each day and to let students pick two (one to eat at lunch and one to take back to class for snack). Many vegetables came from the school's own garden.

For the exercise goal, students came up with the idea of a homework menu, a weeklong homework assignment to help students get 480 minutes of exercise for the week. The menu had four exercise choices each day: one choice was with equipment, one was without equipment, one was with a group, and one was free choice or team sport. It was important to show those students who did not have equipment at home that they could still stay active. Student leaders also planned extra activities before school where students could exercise with friends and they petitioned teachers for extra recess time.

The Community

One of the most powerful parts of the MBI story is the communication with and response from local businesses for the project. **Early on in the project, student leaders wrote letters to several local businesses introducing their team, explaining their goals, and asking for donations of fruits and vegetables.** Food Lion Grocery store responded by donating apples for all of the students. In fact, 50% of the businesses contacted donated something to the project. MBI also has an adopt-a-teacher program where local businesses partner with specific teachers. As part of this program, businesses from the food service and exercise industries come to MBI to speak with students and share unique real-world insight.

The Healthy Challenge Team also wrote letters to parents telling them about their goals and asking for donations. In turn, parents sent in healthy snacks for students to eat throughout the Challenge period.



The Results

Both the quantitative and qualitative results were exciting. **On the activity side, 78% of students completed the homework menu the first time it was distributed, and 83% completed it the second time. Some classes had 100% participation.** And students were commenting about how easy it was to stay active. On the food side, the supply of fruits and vegetables was a bit of a challenge. The cafeteria did offer two fruits and vegetables each day but the school did not have enough for all students to reach their goal. **Penick estimates that they did reach their goal three out of the five days.** To get more donations next year, the team plans to research the names of each local grocery store and superstore's manager and make a phone call followed by a personal letter. They are hoping that donations will increase.

The Impact of the Prize Money

When Penick got the call that MBI had won, she could not contain her excitement. Students had just come off of a leadership symposium and were celebrating the end of testing with a schoolwide basketball game. Each member of the Healthy Challenge Team was called down to center court and the first place prize was announced. "The students just went crazy!"

What will they do with their \$30,000? In addition to the initiatives listed below, Penick says the Challenge was most significant for school pride and teaching the kids that they really can be leaders, meet their goals and achieve success. They plan to use the money for the following initiatives:



- A walking fitness program so students can be active every day.
- Yoga mats for a daily yoga club before school.
- They are also considering testing a brain-based classroom in the school where students sit on exercise balls instead of chairs and read while on an exercise bike.
- MBI will broaden the family involvement with fit nights, cooking demonstrations and exercise components.



Lessons learned: How to Replicate this Success in your Community

Every school is different, but the *Find Your Balance Challenge* team at Myrtle Beach Intermediate points to several key success factors to help other schools:

Embrace It. Don't look at the *Find Your Balance Challenge* as one more thing to do. Penick adds, "Embrace the project and look at it as a way to give a true, real-life meaning to the skills you are teaching. MBI integrated math, writing, science and physical education into the project."

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Student-driven. As a Leadership Model school, MBI is trained to empower kids to lead the learning. It's important to let them lead all steps of the project. "We are trying to build leaders at MBI. We want them to know that if they have goals and ambitions, they can meet them."

Use the Resources. According to Penick, "The Energy Balance website and the lesson plans give you a basis to start with. Because it's user-friendly, it eliminates any excuses!"

Adapt it to Your School. The messages of the program are universal, but it's important to develop the program around each school community's authentic needs. Partner with the Community- According to Penick, getting buy-in and assistance from local businesses has been tremendous and that piece will only grow. "It takes a lot of organizations to take you to your fullest potential."

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