St. Anthony Catholic School: Healthy Competition Leads to Healthier Students

The numbers told the story – and it wasn't a happy one for the health of the children attending St. Anthony Catholic School. The student council conducted surveys to determine the diet and exercise practices of the school's 305 students. What did they find? That less than 45 percent of the students in grades 3-- -6 ate the proper amount of fruits and vegetables. And when it came to exercise, students in these grades participated in physical activity an average of 4-- -5 hours a week. That's about half as much time as they spent playing video games. Administration and staff realized that if the kids of St. Anthony would just spend less time in front of a video terminal and more time engaged in physical activity (and eating a balanced diet), they would be a lot better off.

St. Anthony had some advantages. With an indoor gymnasium, exercise equipment, and an outdoor fitness and walking track, students attended two PE classes a week with a certified PE instructor, and received lessons every day in both exercise and pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. Students were able to utilize fitness equipment outside and recess and during structured activities. Nonetheless, the numbers didn't lie. Students weren't eating enough fruits and vegetables, and they weren't getting enough exercise. What to do?

School administrators and teachers came up with a plan, one based on both active cooperation and healthy competition. Students, families and staff were grouped together into teams, or "Houses", to jointly earn points through participation in physical activities and by making healthy choices (such as nutritionally sound lunch or snack choices.)

"Our Healthy House Competition really teaches the students to think about what their choices are and be confident in making smart ones," explains House Coordinator Penny Mack. "When students see their peers making good choices and get recognized positively, they are more inclined to make those same choices."

Snapshot of St. Anthony Catholic School

St. Anthony Catholic School is located in Madison, a city of almost 17,000 people in Madison County, Mississippi. Madison has some advantages: It is currently the highest-- -income city in the state, and is ranked second-- -most liveable city in Mississippi by AreaVibes.com. A railroad town founded just before the Civil War, Madison is made up of a little over 5,000 households, of which just under half contain children under the age of 18. Over 93 percent of the city's population is White, with just under 5 percent African-- -American, 1.2 percent Asian, and 0.69 percent Latino. Median income for a household in the city was estimated at $105,000 in 2008.

School Type	Catholic
Enrolment	305
Grade Levels	K-- -5

How PE and Health are Taught

PE is taught every day. While students attend PE classes twice a week with a certified PE instructor, classroom teachers provide lessons for both exercise and healthy lifestyles every day,

Background

The survey results cited above make clear the problem faced at St. Anthony: Not enough fruits or vegetables, not enough time engaged in physical activity – despite the presence of facilities.
Students at St. Anthony had the tools they needed to live a healthy lifestyle: An indoor gymnasium, exercise equipment, outdoor fitness and walking track, exercise and healthy living classes every day. What they lacked was motivation.

Identifying The Need

The survey results spelled out the need, by the numbers. In addition, St. Anthony adopted key lesson plans from *Energy Balance 101*. Specifically, "*Decisions, Decisions* was used to gain an understanding of the importance of making food decisions and help the students set specific goals for themselves. *Your Energy In* was introduced in staff meetings to get across the concept of energy balance and aid staff in understanding how various food choices fit into a healthy lifestyle.

St. Anthony students used this information to help shape a goal statement that identified specific needs, augmented by a planned student activity logs and point system to track students' progress on the basis of friendly competition:

- To promote good health through healthy food choices and physical activity.
- To achieve 90 percent completion of activity logs by participants.
- To ensure that all students in Grades 4-- -6 earn a minimum of 9 healthy points in each month, achieved by demonstrating both healthy food choices and fitness activity.

Meeting the Need

"Healthy Competition" is unique in that it not only addresses fitness and healthy choices education, but it also groups staff, students and families together to provide encouragement and support that spans many different age groups.

Timeline

August 2012: Faculty and students divided into fitness groups

September 2012: Fitness goals documented, resting heart rates determined and group members' current fitness level assessed utilizing a standardized national benchmark test. Children educated on the importance of physical activity combined with healthy lifestyle choices.

October 2012-- -April 2013: Members of the community invited to speak on healthy lifestyles and to participate in scheduled walks on meeting days.

May 2013: Decathlon Day, the culmination of "Healthy Competition" is held, with groups engaging in daylong "healthy competition." National benchmark test administered to determine each child's improved fitness. The Fitness Cup awarded to the winning group.

St. Anthony pursued health competitively, but with a support system made up of groups, or "Houses", made up of every age group, and every staff member. The Houses work together to compete for a health and fitness cup at the end of the year.

The students largely compete by cooperating. Significant points are awarded when a child breaks down the isolation barriers by supporting a classmate (regardless of group), accompanying him or her as they walk, encouraging others to keep going as they struggle physically, or by becoming a walking buddy with someone who needs a friend. Points are tracked throughout the year, the group with the most points being awarded a fitness cup. This year the House of Cornelius was the winning team. Staff members and parents can also earn points for their group.

Similar to Yale and Harvard and yes, Harry Potter, children stay in the same House their entire time at the school from Pre-- -K through 6th grade, allowing their bonds to strengthen. Children from the same family (including cousins) are grouped together in the same House. Points are earned through participation in fitness activities, such as walking a mile or walking for 30 minutes, or by making healthy choices such as bringing a nutritionally sound class snack or lunch choice that is nutritionally sound.

In each House, the 6th graders are the leaders. They encourage the children in to engage in specific activities or make specific food choices for healthy living, and lead monthly meetings to assess their progress, discuss any challenges a member might be experiencing, discuss ways to make healthier choices become more fit.

The Results

Approximately 70 percent of the students in Grades 4-- -6 consistently reach their goal of 9 points per month for proper nutritional and fitness decisions. In the first month only 80 percent of the students were completing their daily fitness logs. With the help of the 6th-- -grade student mentors, younger students are completing their logs – bringing log completion rates to 100 percent. Students receive incentive charms each week as they reach their fitness goals.

The entire St. Anthony Community has embraced the healthy culture which was molded by the mindset of making healthy lifestyle choices. Parents now join students each morning in walking on the fitness trail. For the first time, students, parents and staff participated in local 5K races.

Support from the Community

Many community members – including firefighters, police officers and sports coaches – have spoken at the school's morning "Talk-- -then-- -Walk" sessions, telling of their personal lifestyle choices, and how those choices have allowed them to pursue their passions. Every morning, parents now join students on the school's fitness trail. And for the first time, parents, students and staff all participate in local 5K races.

The Impact of the Prize Money

St. Anthony plans to use the prize money to advance the school's long-- -range plan of an Outdoor Explorium to provide various environments of living to foster curiosity and imagination, and enhance student and teacher knowledge of healthy living and advance passion for the natural world. Specifically, the prize award will be used to fund a greenhouse to promote hands-- -on learning for students to grow and investigate healthy fruits and vegetables. The school will also use funds for further staff training and incentive materials to capture data to be shared with the community to inspire others to live a healthy lifestyle. "This grant allows the school to continue the powerful style of positive reinforcement," says Penny Mack.

Lessons Learned

St. Anthony students learned the power of working together, and the value of pursuing individual goals as part of a broader team. “The students also become more aware of what they are eating and explaining why that is a strong choice for their body,” says Mack.