

Classroom Breakfasts and Fun Workouts Prepare Helena, MT Elementary Students for a Healthy, Productive School Day

Issue: In the fall of 2016, Rossiter Elementary School Nurse Candyce Kepler found herself overwhelmed by the number of students coming into her office after the morning bell rang. They complained of stomachaches and headaches, but had no fever. “Are you hungry?” she asked them. Almost all said “Yes.”

“I felt concerned about our students’ issues with hunger, so I approached our principal, Kareen Bangert, and the school’s food service director, Robert Worthy,” Kepler says.

As it turned out, only 57 of Rossiter’s 467 students were taking advantage of the free or partially subsidized breakfasts being served at 8 a.m. in the school’s gymnasium — and only 29 students were opting for an unsubsidized morning meal. The low participation was attributed to many factors. Some students arrived at school late and/or decided they would rather play than eat. For others, eating the school breakfast carried a stigma. Kepler

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, *Let’s Move!* Active Schools (now Active Schools) and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.



Montana First Lady Lisa Bullock visited Rossiter Elementary School in the spring to see the success of the school’s Healthy Fit Club and Breakfast in the Classroom programs.

continuously handed out snacks to hungry students, but knew there had to be a more sustainable solution.

The Big Idea: Inspired by a federally reimbursed program, Breakfast in the Classroom, Kepler and Worthy thought about ways to streamline Rossiter’s breakfast program — such as putting the food in a sack that kids could bring to the first class of the day at 8:30 a.m. They approached the classroom teachers, who soon realized this idea could present both a solution and an opportunity: Students could play outside before school and then eat, instead of having to decide between the two, and tardy students could still have a morning snack. Teachers could turn breakfast into a communal, classroom activity — and perhaps even use it as a chance to talk about nutrition.

Kepler formed a committee with a few teachers to help ease faculty apprehension and secure the enthusiastic buy-in of parents and students. Worthy helped

determine where and how the food would be served, and hired additional staff to help run the operation. The school’s Americorps liaison, Rachelle Sartori, who helps administer the No Child Hungry program, lent her support. In the weeks before the program began, Rossiter staff sent home notifications to parents to remind them of the change.

With the gym no longer being used for breakfast, physical education teacher and SHAPE America member Jennifer Loomis envisioned an opportunity to add fitness to the morning equation. “A lightbulb went off,” she says. “Why not offer morning workouts before the bell?”

Implementation: The Healthy Fit Club and Breakfast in the Classroom programs debuted in January 2017 with the enthusiastic support of students, teachers and parents. The 30-minute workout time starts as soon as students arrive at school on Mondays and Wednesdays at 8 a.m.

Breakfast tables have been replaced by a series of fitness stations, where kids rotate through a balanced, full-body workout. Parents often pop in to observe when they drop their children off, waving and smiling at Loomis as they watch their kids eagerly join their peers in physical activity.

Loomis bases her Healthy Fit Club activities on the SPARK program, which incorporates relatively low-cost equipment such as beanbags and noodles, to create various activities. SPARK supplies materials, teacher training and other resources that help her pack an efficient workout into the 30-minute time frame.

When the 8:30 bell rings, students grab their sack breakfast (milk and a muffin or breakfast cookie) from one of three stations and head to class. "It's pretty remarkable," notes Loomis. "A lot of teachers make it into 'family time.' They talk about healthy nutrition or work on various projects the students may need to catch up on."

Adds another teacher, "When students come into my classroom, it's like a huge family. I think having breakfast strengthens my class." A third teacher reports that the students are fastidious about cleaning up their desks after breakfast because they don't like to work in a dirty environment. By 8:40, lessons begin.

Takeaway: Rossiter Elementary has become a model school for its innovative morning breakfast and workout programs, attracting principals and food service directors from around the state who come to observe before developing programs of their

own. Montana First Lady Lisa Bullock visited the school last spring to see the success of the initiative firsthand.

"Schools in Montana are committed to their students' success and recognize that serving breakfast gives kids the energy they need to focus in the classroom," Bullock told the Helena Independent Record. "We are taking steps in the right direction to increase breakfast participation, and ultimately, put an end to childhood hunger in Montana."

The new programs at Rossiter demonstrate that sometimes profound improvements can be made with minimal effort, cost or disruption to routine. "We worked through a few kinks at first, making some tweaks of how the breakfast work stations would be staffed and where the routes would go," Loomis says. "But before long, we were off and running smoothly."

Results: Since the program began, Kepler has had far fewer students come to the nurse's office complaining of health issues. And, according to statewide teacher surveys, Breakfast in the Classroom has had a positive impact on students' productivity and classroom behaviors.

As one teacher noted, "More students are eating because breakfast is offered in the classroom. This allows more students to focus and attend to school tasks. It's a positive addition to our school."

Since January 2017, program participation has increased from 80 or 90 students a day to more than 200, with even more children bringing in a bagged breakfast from home to enjoy with their classmates. A pre- and post-

Project Team

Jennifer Loomis, PE Teacher

Candyce Kepler, School Nurse

Kareen Bangert, Principal

Robert Worthy, Food Service Director

Rachelle Sartori, AmeriCorps Liaison

assessment of student behavior revealed that 12 out of 19 teachers have observed particular students showing improved focus, concentration and on-task behavior.

The students get an additional boost of energy from their vigorous morning workout, which regularly attracts 60-90 students. The response has been so positive that Loomis hopes to add workouts on Tuesdays and Thursdays, which will allow her to create separate programs for grades K-2 and 3-5.

"By offering more advanced activities for the older students, I can get more students involved," she says. Loomis also started another club that meets every other Thursday to teach students about nutrition as well as physical fitness, with field trips to gardens, farms and food-service kitchens.

Perhaps the biggest endorsement of the Healthy Fit Club comes from the students themselves. "They really look forward to Mondays and Wednesdays," says Loomis. "Once I had to cancel a Monday morning workout because of a conference, and there was groaning throughout the halls after they made the announcement."



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 skillsbased, 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.

Additional Resources

Links to more information about this program can be found at shapeamerica.org/casestudies.



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.