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## Taking the childhood obesity fight to the community

By Sarah Palermo  
 Sentinel Staff

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What would you think if every day someone told you the way to maintain a healthy weight is to burn off as many calories as you take in — and then offered you a plate of cookies?

You'd probably be a bit confused.

Avoiding that kind of disconnect between what's said in Keene School District classrooms and what's done in the community is one teacher's goal.

Beth Corwin wants to work with community groups who can help with wellness programs, and present ideas and suggestions to committees in each Keene school so that students have more options for living out the healthy lifestyle they're taught in the classroom.

The Keene Board of Education approved Corwin's request for a half-year sabbatical at its meeting Tuesday night, in a partnership with Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene.

The hospital offered to pick up half the \$10,000 tab for a long-term substitute for Corwin, the Symonds Elementary School physical education teacher and Quest coordinator (in charge of researching, developing and implementing activities like the artist-in-residence program).

Beginning this summer, Corwin will turn her attention away from the classroom and toward the community.

The work has been a long time coming. The Keene board made wellness in the schools a priority in 2005, when the results of a survey showed students were making unhealthy decisions, despite being taught about the dangers of smoking, underage drinking and a sedentary lifestyle.

A year ago, Corwin approached the district administration about a full year's leave, but was denied. Co-acting Superintendent William B. Gurney said in a year where he proposed eliminating dozens of staff positions, he couldn't justify asking the board for money for a sabbatical.

When the hospital offered \$5,000 if the district could match it, Corwin revised the plan to a half-year, and asked again.

This time, she was successful.

"This is something, that, we pay it lip service ... I'm glad we can finally do something about it and I wish you luck," Keene Board of Education Chairman Kathleen O'Donnell said Tuesday night.

In the past four years, each school has formed a wellness committee and written policies that promote more active, healthy lifestyles for students and staff.

For Corwin, it's a plan that's been developing even longer. She's been a physical education teacher for 16 years, and she's seen the student body change over time.

Statistics show today's schoolchildren might be the first generation in hundreds of years with a lower life expectancy than their parents, largely because of the consequences of obesity.

"It's not a 'NIMBY' (not in my backyard) issue," Corwin said. "We have issues right here in our community ... Our job is to help everybody understand the critical need for our kids to live and eat in a healthy way."



Beth Corwin, a physical education teacher at Symonds School in Keene, teaches a 1st-grade class how to play lacrosse.

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"The results of not doing so are dire."

In addition to long-term effects on children's well-being, poor health hinders their performance in the classroom, and in today's world of high-stakes testing and yearly progress benchmarks, schools can't afford not to have healthy students, Corwin said.

First on her to-do list is a series of meetings with the wellness committee at each school to help them form goals for their particular group of students, parents and staff.

Initiatives won't work any other way, she says.

"With wellness, change needs to ... originate in a grassroots way. No one can come in from the outside and say, you need this or you need that. Somebody from the outside doesn't understand the unique resources and school community," she said.

Instead, her mission is to provide resources, motivation and leadership for the committees to develop their own programs.

The ultimate goal is to connect the work schools do in the classroom with the choices they present students every day.

"What I really hope to do ... is have our curriculum — what we teach in phys. ed. and guidance and with the nurses — consistently supported by our practices at school," Corwin says.

For example, "if in phys. ed., I do a lesson about striking a balance between the calories we take in and the activities we do, that needs to be supported by the chances the kids have to be active, and the kinds of nutritious food we offer."

But the schools can't do it alone, Corwin says.

She'll spend the next six months forming partnerships with the city, and community organizations like Antioch University New England, Keene State College and Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene to create programs for each school in the district.

Several examples of successful partnerships are already under way at Symonds.

The school started a walking and running club in the fall, and brought in mentors from the Keene State College swim team, who the NCAA encourages to get involved in community service.

Teachers have also changed snack time to a morning break, so kids who aren't hungry and don't need a snack can choose from different physical activities, while students who are hungry have a quick snack.

The biggest changes have been around school celebrations, Corwin said.

Instead of celebrating holidays or other events sitting down with a table full of sweets, the school will set up vigorous physical games for the kids, and offer healthy snacks and one special treat, she said.

But Corwin stressed that the schools can't change the community students live in when they're not in class.

"Even if we did everything as well as we could, we can't send out kids who all by themselves can create a healthy community," she said.

And Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene can't do it on their own, either, she said.

"And the city, they can do all sorts of wonderful infrastructure improvement, but without the partnerships between all of us, our members can't make healthy choices unless they're aware of healthy opportunities."

For instance, the city can put efforts into making more walking, biking and running paths, but without an organized group to motivate people to use them, they might go unused, Corwin said.

"It takes everybody working all together."

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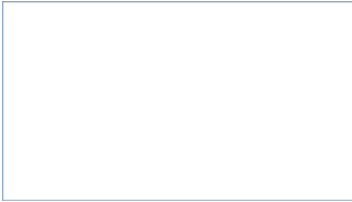


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