

Essay: Advocate for healthy kids

Heidi Burke and Erick Stephens 11:22 a.m. EDT September 13, 2014



(Photo: Walter Colley)

Over the past four decades, obesity rates across the United States have soared among all age groups. In that time period, childhood obesity rates increased more than four times among children ages 6 to 11. Today, more than 23 million children and teens in the U.S. are overweight or obese. These statistics are alarming. This epidemic puts nearly one-third of America's children at early risk for Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and even stroke, which are typically associated with adulthood.

September is National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, the perfect time to showcase how our community is working to improve the health and wellness of our young people. The Rochester City School District (RCSD) has made progress in recent years with the implementation of mandated daily recess and is utilizing federal programs to provide healthy snacks. The Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency's (FLHSA) HealthiKids Initiative has had a large hand in making these changes possible. However, to ensure continued long-term change, parents must get involved at school and understand how to be advocates for their kids.

Parents often do not realize how much power they have to change policy and improve school programs. For example, parents at School No. 10 volunteered to observe lunch to understand why students avoided healthy options available to them. Parents observed that chocolate and strawberry milk were often the most accessible milk options in the lunch line. Parents then took action and created a "Food Action Team," with the purpose of connecting with the school district and advocacy groups to give healthier options better placement in the lunch line.

Recess has also evolved thanks to the help of parents. FLHSA and the Children's Institute enlisted the help of parents from RCSD elementary schools to observe how daily recess was being implemented. This enabled parents to be actively engaged in ensuring kids were getting the recommended amount of physical activity during designated recess times.

Efforts like this are made stronger when parents in our community are actively involved. Consider how you can get involved in your child's school by visiting www.healthikids.org or www.beahealthyhero.org for tips on living a healthier lifestyle.

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