

The Nutrition Revolution: A School-Based Health Center Addresses Overweight and Eating Habits

By Carolyn Read, MPH, MSW

Two years ago, the School-Based Health Center (SBHC) at Proviso East High School^{1[1]} in Maywood, Illinois opened its doors for the first time. Students lined up for school and sports physicals, immunizations, mental health care and health education. As the SBHC staff began to get their feet on the ground and were able to lift their eyes over the charts that were rapidly filling the file cabinets, they became concerned. Many students coming to the SBHC for other health issues were also struggling with overweight and poor nutrition. Simultaneously, national statistics were showing that 15.3% of 12-19 year olds were overweight, triple that of forty years ago, and Type 2 diabetes, previously considered an adult disease, had increased significantly in children and adolescents. The Centers for Disease Control stated that the rate of overweight African American girls was 26.6% and African American boys 20.7%.^{2[2]} The students visiting the health center reported skipping breakfast and were seen eating chips, preferably “Flamin’ Hots”, candy and drinking a lot of carbonated and high sugar drinks. These observations and national statistics led to a random chart audit at the SBHC which confirmed the concerns of the health center staff; the audits revealed that 70% of SBHC patients were at risk for overweight (BMI>85th percentile) and 20% already were overweight (BMI>95th percentile).^{3[3]} Something had to be done!

To address the issue of overweight and poor nutrition, the SBHC implemented an overarching program called *The Nutrition Revolution*. The first aspect of *The Nutrition Revolution* designates the SBHC as a *Junk Free Zone*, where students are not allowed to consume junk food such as chips, candy, carbonated beverages and other foods with low or no nutritional value. In the *Junk Free Zone* students at Proviso East High School are given the opportunity to put away or trade in their junk for a healthy snack provided by the SBHC. The healthy snacks of fruit, cheese, pretzels, and water and all other programs in *The Nutrition Revolution* are funded by a grant from the Westlake Health Foundation and from generous donations from community businesses.

Cooking with Heart and Soul (CWHS) followed closely on the heels of the *Junk Free Zone* and is currently one of the most popular components of *The Nutrition Revolution*. It gives students and their families an opportunity to meet once a week for six-weeks and learn how to prepare healthy, easy-to-make, delicious meals. Each week a different guest chef (faculty and staff members from the school, community members, or SBHC staff) teaches the 22-25 participants how to prepare and cook a nutritious dinner. Everyone partakes in the chopping, mixing and cooking. The families then have the opportunity, which their busy lives usually prevent, to sit with their families and enjoy the meal together. The participants then take part in a twenty-minute nutrition presentation given by the SBHC Health Education Coordinator or by Loyola University Chicago dietetic interns, on topics such as reading food labels, fats and sugars, serving sizes, exercise and the food guide pyramid. Lastly, the families are given an opportunity to participate in a discussion regarding stress management, and they learn how eating habits and stress are linked. Each week the SBHC Clinical Psychologist addresses a different aspect of stress and diet and its impact on mental and physical health. This vital portion of *Cooking with*

^{1[1]} Proviso East High School in Maywood, IL is located ten miles from Chicago and has 2,157 students; 82.2% are African American, 14.3% are Hispanic, 2.4 are White/European descent, 1.0% is Asian.

^{2[2]} Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, GA, www.cdc.gov, 2000 Statistics.

^{3[3]} PEHS SBHC Chart Audits, 9/02-12/02.

Heart and Soul allows the participants to learn how their mental health and how they manage the stress of their daily lives can directly impact their weight, what they eat and how they feel. The evening concludes with door prize drawings donated by local community businesses.

Overall, the program seeks to show people the vital connection between healthy eating, stress management and good nutrition and that it is easy to incorporate simple, positive changes into busy schedules. *CWHS* is not intended to promote weight loss but it does strive to improve and sustain behavior changes that people are beginning to make in regard to diet and exercise. Free childcare is also provided for the participant's young children and the younger children also dine with their parents and older siblings. At the end of the six-weeks, all families receive a cookbook filled with the recipes they prepared during the program. The cookbook also provides them with many other healthy recipes, nutrition and stress management information. The Proviso East School-Based Health Center staff has successfully implemented *Cooking with Heart and Soul* three times since October 2002.

Other components of the *Nutrition Revolution* include a *Healthy Steps Prenatal Class*, an eight-week program that along with traditional childbirth preparation teaches young student mothers-to-be how to eat well during their pregnancy. *The Walking Club* is the exercise component of the *Nutrition Revolution* led by health center employees; it encourages students and staff to get together every day after school and walk for forty minutes. Additionally, students may participate in one-on-one weight loss counseling with the Nurse Practitioner and/or a Loyola University Chicago dietetic intern.

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