

Walk On! Celebrates 10 Years of Fighting Childhood Obesity in Arizona

Written by Stacia Affelt

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The rock wall at Kerr Elementary was purchased with the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona Walk On! Challenge grant money that the school won earlier this year. Photo courtesy of Lisa Keeslar, Physical Education teacher at Kerr.

Over the last decade, childhood obesity has become a serious issue across the country. In Arizona alone, 19.8 percent of youth were considered obese as opposed to the United States average of 15.7 percent, according to a recent study.

Ten years ago, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona started The Walk On! Challenge to help fight childhood obesity through exercise and has now expanded to helping children make healthy lifestyle choices. Walk On! now reaches more than a thousand classrooms and has impacted more than 260,000 students, says Health Promotion Executive from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona Tara Consentino.

"Arizona has a long-standing commitment to fighting childhood obesity and believes in the health and wellness of all Arizonans and that includes the wellbeing of Arizona children," says Consentino.

Walk On! is a free, 28-day health education program that is now being implemented in fourth and fifth-grade classrooms every February. Consentino says students at this age have many healthy choices to make and start becoming more aware of their eating and exercising habits. The classroom is an important place to learn about and practice these habits, as it is the main environment that shapes them outside of the home and where they spend up to eight hours a day.

The Walk On! program teaches students the importance of healthy habits using a 5-2-1-0 principle, which encourages students to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, spend two hours or less on screen time every day, participate in one hour of physical activity every day, and drink zero non-sweetened drinks.

"Research shows time and again that these are healthy habits that can greatly affect a child's health," says Consentino.

Participating teachers receive tool kits from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona with information and in-class materials about the program. This includes curriculum and journals that the students keep to record what they ate that day and what exercise they participated in.

Physical Education Specialist at Kerr Elementary Lisa Keeslar has been teaching for 26 years, and sees childhood obesity as a serious problem in her students. She says it's more important now than ever to fight obesity in children, but with the help of the Walk On! program she has already started to see some positive changes.

"What I do notice is that kids know and like the program," Keeslar says. "They get excited about doing it again."

Keeslar says these changes include kids excitedly coming up to her to tell her what they ate last night or the last time they exercised. What's more, she says, is these kids are developing habits that will last a lifetime.

"Even if I do this whole program and I only change five kids' habits, it's worth it," says Keeslar. It's five more kids. We can't afford for us not to do it.

Arizona teachers and school administration members interested in registering for the Walk On! Challenge or want to know more should visit www.walkonaz.com. The deadline to register for the program is Nov. 21, 2014.