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The Leicestershire Healthy Schools Programme and healthy eating

A good diet is essential for a healthy lifestyle, but all too often schools have been criticised for the approach they take.

However, schools in Leicestershire have been working on getting across the right messages to pupils for several years thanks to a partnership between the council and local NHS.

Partnership working

Eating in schools has had its highest ever profile since celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's television show some years ago. The series highlighted a culture of ignorance about the importance of promoting a healthy diet in schools. But not all schools are condemning their pupils to a diet of turkey twizzlers. In Leicestershire, children have been taught the importance of healthy eating for the last six years.

A joint partnership between the county council and local NHS established the Leicestershire Healthy Schools Programme in 2001. The body now oversees the national Healthy Schools Programme at a local level, which also incorporates: physical activity, personal, social and health education, emotional health and well-being.

The county has one of the best records in the country with 258 of the 287 local primary and secondary schools on board. Over half have achieved healthy school status by hitting the targets set nationally.

Importance of diet

Some schools in Leicestershire increased the sale of healthier foods by 15 per cent, fruit by 25 per cent and a fall of 10 per cent

for crisps and sugary drinks.

But the success of Leicestershire is not judged on statistics alone. Across the county, schools are adopting ever more innovative ways of reaching out to children and young people. The programme, which manages on a budget of £110,000 a year, has overseen:

- ~ healthy eating lessons becoming a key part of the curriculum
- ~ the creation of healthy tuck shops
- ~ projects to design a healthy lunchbox

The programme's manager Jane Roberts says:

"Different schools have adopted different approaches. But the end goal is always the same - to teach pupils about the importance of diet and get them eating more nutritional foods. It is important that young people take responsibility for their health. If we get it right now they will pass on the good habits to their families and others later in life. But it also has immediate benefits. They are calmer at school and also often have fewer days off ill."

Reducing obesity

Ms Roberts says the measures being taken by Leicestershire's schools and others elsewhere in the country will have a huge influence over whether the country gets to grips with the obesity problems. Latest figures show that one in seven 15-year-olds and one in 12 six-year-olds are classed as obese. Jane Roberts says:

"It is clear there is a problem and it is only right that schools try to tackle this."

The programme has produced a toolkit to help schools achieve healthy school status by:

- ~ giving tips on consulting with pupils
- ~ developing a food policy
- ~ marketing the push through posters and leaflets

A newsletter is also produced to help promote best practice by schools and advice is given on where to go for funding. The programme does have a small pot of grant money of its own for schools to bid for. Jane Roberts says:

"We try to give schools all the support we can. There is a range of national criteria they have to fulfill, while certain standards are demanded by Ofsted. There is a lot for schools to achieve and it has been a gradual process over the years, but I think we are seeing some real progress."

Healthy eating plan

One of the most proactive schools has been Ashby School in the northwest of the county. Three years ago, it took control of its own food preparation and adopted a 21-point healthy eating plan to ensure healthier recipes lower in salt, fat and sugar. This included a commitment to oven-cook or grill instead of frying, avoiding artificial flavorings where possible, using semi-skimmed milk and providing free drinking water.

In autumn 2006, the school completely withdrew all crisps, chocolate and fizzy drinks from sale, while chips are only available twice a week. Burgers are still on the menu, but these are handmade using lower fat meat. Ashby has also introduced self-service salad and deli bars, while the dining room has been redecorated and MTV introduced to make it more enticing for the 14 to 19-year-old pupils.

Healthy eating trends

The results speak for themselves. Since

2002, sales of burgers in the main two restaurants have fallen from 220 a day to 100. Meanwhile, sandwich wraps sales have increased from zero to 40, jacket potatoes from four to 40 and salads from 25 to 70.

Long Field High School in Melton is another success story. The school has set up a nutritional action group, which includes pupils, catering representatives, parents and governors. Hazel McSweeney, teacher and healthy school coordinator, says:

"The pupils have been very positive about what we have been trying to do. It does take time, but I think helping children get into good habits now is essential."

Healthy eating has been introduced on to the school curriculum and the school is in the process of trying to get funding for a healthy tuck shop. A health day is also in the pipeline whereby pupils are released from the normal timetable to take part in a range of activities to promote a healthy lifestyle, including the opportunity to design a virtual diet. Suffice to say, turkey twizzlers will not be on the menu.

Other core themes*

*Jane Roberts has added additional material

The three other 'core' themes that schools need to cover in order to achieve healthy school status are physical activity, personal social health education and emotional health and well being.

These themes are important in supporting children and young people to develop life skills and making decisions about their health and their health related behaviour.

Physical activities

Schools have worked hard to provide 'broader' physical activities which also include travelling to and from school by walking or cycling. Some schools run gardening clubs whereby the children get to eat the 'fruits and veg' of their labour!

At Saint Charles Catholic Primary school in Measham they start the morning with a

'Wake up. Shake up session for pupils, staff and parents.

At Bosworth College in Desford they have a comprehensive range of physical activities for staff so that they too can be fit and active, this also helps to provide positive role models for students and adds to the physical activity culture within the college.

Personal Social Health Education

At Barwell Junior School they have implemented a fantastic Personal Social Health Education scheme of work covering aspects of drug education and sex and relationships education as well as incorporating the SEAL (Social

Emotional Aspects of Learning) activities. These activities also contribute towards the criteria for the emotional health and well being core theme.

The ethos, culture and pastoral care at Forest Way Special School is a particular strength as is their school council which enables children and young people attending the school to actively participate in school life.

The Healthy Schools Programme continues to go from strength to strength within Leicestershire providing positive outcomes for children and young people and making a significant contribution to the Every Child Matters agenda.