



SANTA CLARA COUNTY
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

fit for learning™

Helping Students Succeed

Three years after the Santa Clara County Office of Education began campaigning to make the entire county a Healthy Kids Zone, its *fit for learning*™ initiative has drawn praise and sponsorship from all corners of the community—from the corridors of medical institutions to the boardrooms of corporations.

But perhaps the most meaningful sign of its success lies in the classroom. After all, *fit for learning* is designed to change the environment in which students learn.



Mary Hoshiko and Dr. Walter Bortz

"The first key component," says Dr. Walter Bortz, who helped pioneer the program, "is the schools."

fit for learning supports and encourages healthy eating habits and increased physical activity. The program unobtrusively appears in classrooms in the form of resource guides for



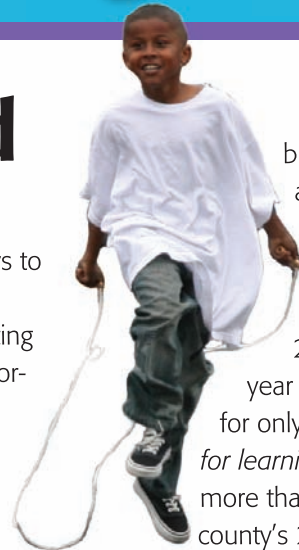
teachers. The guide provides ways to weave fruits, vegetables and the importance of exercising into existing lesson plans that conform to California's teaching standards.

Is the language class studying subjects, verbs and compound sentences? Students might be assigned to write a narrative describing the first time they tried a new fruit or vegetable. Focusing on fractions? They can analyze nutrition food labels and calculate the percent daily values of consumption in calories. Geography and social science time? Look at how climate influences the way nations cultivate and grow foods.

But *fit for learning* doesn't stop there. It also fosters exercise and physical activities. Schools have fit for learning "Champions" who remind teachers to take short breaks between instructions for five-minute sessions of jumping jacks.

"Kids sit too long; they need movement," said Principal Linh Nguyen at Pomeroy Elementary School, with the Santa Clara Unified School District. "It helps them focus better."

At Pomeroy, every teacher now



breaks for stretches and exercises inside the classroom.

Launched in the 2005-06 school year as a pilot program for only fifth-graders, *fit for learning* had spread to more than half of the county's 228 elementary

schools by spring of 2008. The ultimate goal is to put a resource guide in every K-6 teacher's hands.

fit for learning is becoming Santa Clara County's rally for action, said Mary Hoshiko, vice president of program and community development for YMCA of Santa Clara Valley.

Ms. Hoshiko and others serve as the program's de facto PR team, attending workshops around the state to reach out to other counties.

"Communities see what is happening here in Santa Clara County," said Ms. Hoshiko, "and they want to do something similar."

As test scores and academic performance indexes consumed school districts in recent years, a counter-tide movement of teachers and principals, moms and dads, have

continued next page

ffl: Starting Healthful Habits Early

continued from previous page

turned their attention to the well-being of the whole child.

As Steve Berta, *fit for learning's* coordinator, is fond of saying: "The brain doesn't come to school by itself. The brain comes to school in a body."

His second favorite maxim: "A healthy child will be a more successful student."

Statistics show that one in three children is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. By teenage years, obesity is hard to reverse.

"Once obesity is a problem, we're making backward intervention," said Dr. Catherine Albin, chief of pediatrics for Kaiser Permanente Santa Clara County. "It's much better to look at children and toddlers, and integrate (fitness) into a family's life."

What Dr. Albin likes about *fit for learning*, and the reason why it translates so well with youngsters, is its message.

"It's not saying being fat is bad. It's not about appearances. It's not about body mass index," said Dr. Albin. "It's doing things healthful for your life."

Revolution is too radical a word and makes some people uneasy. But what else to call a movement that successfully convinces youngsters to eschew birthday cakes for fruit bouquets? For Valentine's Day, the gifting of chocolates and sugar-coated candy is now considered ... yuck ... unhealthy.



ffl is unique in three ways:

It sets standards and benchmarks to measure success; it selects a theme for each month; and it is sustainable.

Standards: At the end of the year, teachers assess students on their knowledge of health and nutrition topics covered during the year.

Themes: Each school month comes with a theme to help teachers concentrate on one aspect of healthy living or nutrition. Themes also provide community-based organizations with a way to coordinate their programs with schools.

Sustainability: The *ffl* indoctrination begins in kindergarten and follows youngsters through sixth grade by encouraging teachers to weave health and physical activity into existing disciplines.



On Halloween, students and families broke with the trick-or-treat tradition and headed to a family night sponsored by Barnes and Noble Booksellers where arts and crafts, rather than sweets, was the theme.

When Dr. Albin first heard about *fit for learning* two years ago, she immediately recognized that the effort "transcended normal boundaries." Its message was not about intervention, she said, but "a way of life."

Kaiser is a big *fit for learning* sponsor. This year, its health-conscious calendars were distributed to every student at Pomeroy School. January featured a boy wearing a T-shirt reading: "I will not be part of Generation XXL."

Last year, Kaiser visited Pomeroy School, which has an absolute No candy, No sweets, No cakes policy, to put on an assembly called "Best Me." The day-long event consisted of workshops and exercises focusing on nutrition, physical exercise and body image.



The message, said Principal Nguyen, was: "What they eat, what they do and their lifestyle all affect their success and future health."

fit for learning has been supported by community sponsors such as Kaiser Permanente, the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, The Health Trust, Silicon Valley Leadership Group, the County of Santa Clara, and others.

For her enthusiastic *fit for learning* work, Ms. Hoshiko, with the YMCA, received the 2007 "Wally Award," named after Dr. Bortz, a senior adviser to The Health Trust and a retired Stanford University clinical associate professor. The Wally (Wellness and Living Life Youthfully) Award is given every year to someone in the community who promotes and supports children's health.

"*fit for learning* is bigger than schools. It's bigger than after-schools," said Ms. Hoshiko. "It's taken on a life of its own in Santa Clara County. We just have to keep the energy going."

Community Plays Key Role in Fitness

Every Friday morning, bright and early, Pomeroy Elementary School Principal Linh Nguyen leads a five-minute stretch and exercise cheer in front of about 50 students in the school yard.

"What are we?" he yells.

"Fit," they answer.

"Fit for what?" he shouts more loudly.

"fit for learning!" they scream.

Pomeroy, in Santa Clara Unified School District, has incorporated *fit for learning* into classroom instruction and activities schoolwide. It is also among a handful of schools where community-based organizations, already on school grounds with services and activities, have embraced *fit for learning* goals and made them their own.

The core mission of *fit for learning* – promoting healthy mind and body – is visible throughout Pomeroy, from classroom gardens that teach students about nature to children's books that encourage healthy habits and nutrition.

Out on the sports field, students every day run past a large yellow billboard – a mural depicting children at (healthy) play. Against the vibrant



Students keep their bodies and their brains active

backdrop of colors, the parent-muralist has written: Healthy choices give you a healthy mind.



Visit the principal's office and a Kaiser Permanente calendar reminds you to eat right. The month of February, for instance, promotes wheat bread. "White bread is so white bread," it reads.

fit for learning collaborators at Pomeroy include the American Heart Association, YMCA of Santa Clara Valley, Bay Area Women's Sports Initiative (BAWSI), Digital Clubhouse Network, Kaiser Permanente, and others.

fit for learning acts as an umbrella, under which there are collected little pieces of programs

already at the school, said Nguyen. "It's not like we're sacrificing anything to add this on," said the principal. "It was already there."

BAWSI, for example, was already on campus working with 3rd, 4th and 5th grade girls on self-esteem and body image through the use of sports. *fit for learning* simply reinforced BAWSI's healthy themes.



Digital Clubhouse, which helps students learn about and use technology, continues its mission but with an added focus on physical education, nutrition and health.

And for the school's newsletter, the "Pomeroy Press," a Kaiser physician contributes a monthly column called, "Doc's Talk."

Cheetos once littered the campus. Today, parents know better than to sneak fast-food onto school grounds if they want to spend lunch time with their children.

"It's working," said Nguyen. "The message has gotten out to the community."



Painter School Students Walk the Walk

To see if *fit for learning* is working, one only needs to visit Painter School during lunchtime.

While many students might be carrying trays containing little or no fruit or vegetables, students from Cyndi MacDonald's fourth- and fifth-grade combination class can be seen picking up a pear or apple – along with legumes – to complete their hot meals.

Tajea Allen, 10, is a fourth-grader in the class. Though her all-time favorite food is ice cream, she knows not to go crazy with the Rocky Road. "You can eat the junk foods," Tajea said, "but it's better to eat them less and eat fruits and vegetables more."

The *fit for learning* program has brought a whole new element to the school environment for MacDonald's students at the school, which is in the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District.

Every week for the past three years, her class has sent care packages to U.S. men and women serving in Iraq. She has tied in social studies and geography lessons as part of the project. What was missing was a physical-and-nutrition component. Along came *fit for learning*.

MacDonald signed up to be a *fit* champion and got trained. Shortly after, the energetic teacher was packing a pedometer on every one of her students for the latest classroom project, "Walk to Iraq." The pedometers count how many steps each student takes during the day; the more physically active the student, the higher the count. Every 2,500 steps translate to about one mile.

"It gives them more meaning," said MacDonald. "It gives them a better understanding of how many miles the men and women in Iraq have really gone." (Answer: At least 6,000 miles)

Fitness is a recurring theme for MacDonald's students, from the classroom to the playground to the lunchroom.

Alum Rock School District nutrition educator Amber Watson periodically visits MacDonald's class to reinforce *fit for learning* themes. She makes sure the cafeteria food conforms with *fit for learning* objectives.

As young Tajea said, just before rubbing some hand sanitizer on her hands – as do all her classmates— before heading out to lunch: "You want to be healthy for the rest of your life."



Painter students get a lesson in food groups and nutrition