Cleveland students fight obesity with help from grants

By Karen Smith
Staff Writer

Kids at Cleveland Elementary in Livonia are eating healthier and moving more, thanks in part to a $30,000 grant to fight childhood obesity.

Fourth-grader Sydney Gonzalez, 9, said kids snap up new colorful play equipment within the first five minutes of recess. “Yesterday a bunch of kids were racing. There was a stampede,” she said.

The students also wait in line to buy oranges, bananas and grapes from the snack bar, the same snack bar that just a year or so ago sold Twix candy bars and cookies.

Cleveland was one of 20 Michigan elementary schools awarded a Healthy School Transformation package from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, part of the 2012-13 Building Healthy Communities Program, a partnership between Blue Cross, the Center for School Health at Wayne State University and the Michigan Fitness Foundation.

The package included soccer balls, basketballs, jump ropes and other play equipment for recess and physical education, program materials, curriculum, professional development and mentoring.

Physical education teacher Caryl Dazer said she can see a difference in the children's faces. “They seem to be more engaged, more excited to come to physical education. There's a ball for every student — no one's waiting around anymore to get active.”

And, attendance at school events involving physical activity like Swim Night has doubled.

Fourth-grade teacher Mary Jo Baringhaus said she sees a difference in the snacks students bring from home. “I don't feel like I have to monitor them like I used to,” she said.

Dazer applied for the grant after hearing about it at a workshop at Wayne State. The school qualified, in part, because 49 percent of the students qualify for the federal free and reduced-price school meals program. Many of the parents cannot afford to pay for their children to participate in extracurricular sports, she said.

At school, physical education is a specials class offered just once a week for 45 minutes.

Dazer and Baringhaus estimate that 40 percent of the students are overweight or obese, more than the national average of 30 percent.

The main goal of the grant is to get kids active before, during and after school.
Teachers do “Fit Bits,” a few minutes of exercise to music, in the morning or throughout the day. Members of the Healthy Squad Team, a student leadership group, announce “healthy tips of the day” each morning, such as “Make sure your plate is half full of fruits and vegetables” or “Encourage someone at home to go for a walk with you.”

After school, there is a physical activity club that meets once a week for rock climbing and other physical activities. There is no charge to attend and club members get a healthy after-school snack.

Fourth-grader Aidan Wiet, 9, is a member of the Healthy Squad Team, as is Sydney. They give up part of their recess to help plan activities to promote healthy eating and physical activity.

Aidan and Sydney said they encourage other students to play outside and find a sport they like. “Even if you win or lose, it’s about having fun,” Aidan said.

The school also received a $4,000 “Fuel Up to Play 60” grant from the United Dairy Industry of Michigan to fund activities to help kids choose healthy foods and be active for at least 60 minutes every day.

Upcoming activities include a Mission Nutrition assembly that blends magic, comedy and stories to gets kids excited about making themselves healthier; a Jump rope for Heart event, a Family Fitness Night and Winter Field Day with an Iditarod challenge.

Dazer said she hopes students take home what they learn at school about food and fitness and encourage others in their families to be healthy as well.

Sydney did that with a recipe she learned at school for a dip for graham crackers made with pumpkin, orange juice and yogurt. She told her mother the ingredients and they made it for Thanksgiving. It was a hit with the whole family. “It smells delicious — like cheesecake,” Sydney said.

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