

# SUCCESS STORIES

by: Marcia Middleton

## Helping Disadvantaged Kids to Stay Healthy

### SUMMARY

The Rochester City School District's Wellness Policy aims to improve health and academic outcomes for the many disadvantaged students it serves. Students in the District have high rates of poverty, obesity, and poor health practices. In the past 2 years, Coordinated School Health (CSH) programs have been implemented district-wide, with vital infrastructure support coming from HEART--the CDC-funded initiative called "Health Engagement and Action for Rochester's Transformation." Continued HEART support will help sustain and extend this success.



### CHALLENGE

How can Rochester's beleaguered urban schools achieve their primary mission of education if students and staff are not healthy? Schools in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) face serious challenges connected with concentrated urban poverty, which adversely affect the health and academic achievement of students. The City of Rochester ranks 11th nationally in per-capita child poverty, the worst in New York State. Among urban school

districts in upstate New York, the RCSD has the largest percentage of minority students (89%), the lowest graduation rate (51%), and the largest percentage of students who qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program (88%). Almost 40% of 2-18 year olds in the City of Rochester are overweight or obese, compared to 25% in the surrounding suburbs of Monroe County, and unhealthy eating and activity practices are more common among urban youth.

### YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

**How can you help to improve the health and learning of the 33,500 pre K-12 students and 15,000 adult students in the District, and support 5,700 employees in staying healthy?**

- Parents, guardians, community members, and staff can join their school's Wellness Team to make needed health improvements.
- Community partner agencies can provide funds and support for systems change to assist the District in implementing their Wellness Policy and CSH.
- Everyone can share a success story!

"HEART has helped the District make tremendous progress with CSH in just 2 years. It's also given us opportunities for networking so we can find ways to meet District needs, such as staff wellness programs and mental health services for students."

- Carlos Cotto, RCSD

## SOLUTION

The RCSD's Wellness Policy links health to academic performance and gives schools responsibility for student and staff wellness. This policy is being put into practice district-wide by implementing CSH, an evidence-based strategy recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for improving students' health and learning. Over the past 2 years, infrastructure support for CSH implementation was provided by the CDC-funded initiative called Health Engagement and Action for Rochester's Transformation (HEART) and the University of Rochester's Americorps VISTA program.

## RESULTS

This vital community support has resulted in exponential growth in schools implementing CSH programs. In just 1 year, from June 2012-June 2013, the number of participating schools jumped from 11 to all 62 schools in the District! Each school has a Wellness Champion and Wellness Team. All schools have assessed their unique health needs using a checklist, and developed an improvement plan to increase physical activity and healthy eating.

HEART was recently recognized by the RCSD Superintendent and members of the Board of Education for supporting the early successes of CSH in the District. The recognition award was presented at a meeting that was well-attended by parents, teachers, and other school staff. The efforts of Wellness Champions to increase physical activity and healthy eating within their schools were also celebrated.

### Contact

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## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What are the next steps for CSH and Wellness Policy?

HEART support will continue for the District's CSH administrator to help build on and fully implement health improvement plans developed last year. HEART will also provide a monthly school health e-letter to communicate school successes, engage parents, and share grant opportunities and community resources. Support will be given to help meet staff professional development needs. For example, plans are in progress to offer the Diabetes Prevention Program for staff and nutrition education for parents. Finally, new scheduling will increase the time that elementary students spend in physical education to 80-120 minutes per week so schools comply with the District's Wellness Policy.