

Wellness Warriors

Riverside High program encourages exercise, better food choices

By Davin White

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Tongue wagging and heart racing, Josh Eastman fights through his last few steps.

Trainer Luke Bennett paces Eastman's "stair steps" on a metronome from Pied Piper. He's pleased with the results.

Of 19 students in the 10-week voluntary "Warriors on Wellness" program at Riverside High School, 11 failed to finish the three-minute stair-step exercise the first week, Bennett said.

"This last time, nobody had to quit early," he said. The students also improved the speed of their shuttle runs.

Soon afterward, Bennett paced students Courtney Campbell and Shelby Penn in the drill. Eleventh-grader Beau Gilmore says the high-energy Bennett acts like a big kid.

"I try to keep 'em motivated," Bennett said.

On a crisp spring Monday at Riverside, Bennett also led teams in volleyball, shoot-around basketball and push-ups.

Riverside's wellness program, unique in Kanawha County, focuses on more than just exercise. Physician assistant Mary Grandon said students learn better food choices and how to cut down on stress.

"The goal of this program was just to show them they can be healthy at any weight," Grandon said. "Some of them battle depression as well as self-esteem issues.

"This program's been designed with just a few kids in mind to see if we could make a difference," she said.

Kate Bird, a dietician consultant for the class, set up food models this week to simulate proper meals and discourage "mindless eating."

She'd also set up various meals with too many of one food group and ask the students where to add or take away proteins, fruits, vegetables, desserts and drinks.

Portion size had been a problem.

"The kids will say, 'Oh my gosh! Look how small this is,'" Bird said. "And I said, 'this is what it's supposed to look like.'"

Still, she stresses a belief that foods aren't necessarily good or bad, but chocolate cakes serve as "sometimes foods" and green, leafy vegetables are "everyday foods."

At times, Bird believes she's drawing blank stares, but also feels the students made progress over the 10-week program.

The program is one exercise sponsored by the Riverside Health Center, a part of the Cabin Creek Health System. The only school-based health center in Kanawha County, Riverside's is one of 43 School Based Health Centers providing care to students in 54 schools in West Virginia, according to Amber Crist, Rural Health Education Partnership coordinator for the Cabin Creek-based system.

The health center is open to the community.

Of the 1275 students at Riverside, more than 800 have parental consent forms on file at the center, according to Crist. Parents must allow consent at the beginning of the year for their children to be seen at the center.

Brenda Isaac, lead school nurse for Kanawha County Schools, said Capital and Herbert Hoover, for a short time, had comparable health programs in years past. Charleston Area Medical Center pulled the Capital program because of funding shortfalls, she said.

"School-based health centers are not money makers," she said.

Still, Isaac said other wellness and education activities are offered in Kanawha County schools through school nurses.

Reflecting on the past 10 weeks, Riverside ninth-grader Erica Eastman, Josh's sister, enjoyed "knowing that you can get a really good workout in the class and you can do this stuff at home."

An obstacle course, her brother's favorite, had also been on the course's list of strenuous activities.

"They say if you mix up exercise, you lose a lot of weight faster," added Beau Gilmore, an 11th-grader at Riverside. "I figure everybody's benefited and is going to learn from it."

Gilmore and his classmates also played "Clever Catch," where they tossed a yellow beach ball teeming with health questions. Players read questions aloud, answered and threw the ball to someone else.

A few questions included: "True or False: Some stress is good for you," "Name one social benefit of exercise" and "Name three unhealthy personal behaviors."

With the end of the program, the concern is that students might slack on their exercise or food choices.

"At least they'll be thinking," Bennett said. "They'll know they'll be making bad choices."

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