

Jen Bruno Recognized for Successful Wellness Policies

Jen Bruno, Site Coordinator for the Fitness 4 Life HBI Learning Center at Cesar Chavez Middle School was recognized at the Second Annual School Wellness Recognition Awards on May 27, 2009. The Go for Health! Collaborative and the Santa Cruz County Office of Education recognized 14 faculty and administrators from Pajaro Valley Unified School District's Fitness 4 Life afterschool program who made outstanding efforts implementing school wellness policies and programs.

Jen Bruno was recognized this spring for her initiative and innovation at her program. Jen has been an active participant in the Healthy Behaviors Initiative Learning Community, and her site is one of HBI's 17 Learning Centers. The following article was published and provides more details about her recognition. Congratulations Jen!

Schools recognized for successful wellness policies

By KEENAN WEATHERFORD

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"Where have all the healthy, happy people from Norman Rockwell paintings gone?" lamented the slideshow preceding Santa Cruz County School Superintendent Michael Watkins' keynote speech at the Second Annual School Wellness Recognition Awards on May 27.

The awards event, which was coordinated by the Go for Health! Collaborative and the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, recognized 14 faculty and administrators who have made outstanding efforts implementing school wellness policies and programs.

Watkins started the event by acknowledging progress already made in the county. Childhood obesity rates were "off the charts" two to three years ago, he said, but they've improved significantly since. In 2005, nearly 25 percent of children in Santa Cruz County were considered overweight, which ranked the county among the 10 worst in California. The numbers are even worse in the low-income parts of the county, which Watkins acknowledged. In Pajaro Valley, 22 percent of adults are considered obese, compared to 12 percent in other parts of the county, according to Shebreh Kalantari, the director of community organizing for United Way in Santa Cruz County. And 36 percent of fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District are considered obese, as opposed to 24 percent of students the same age in other school districts.

While obesity itself is a problem, it is magnified because it often leads to other more serious health conditions like diabetes. Watkins, whose mother had diabetes, said he understood the

"devastation it can wreak on the individual and on the family." The best way to fight these health problems, which also include heart disease, kidney failure and cancer, is to start early and ensure that children live healthy lifestyles both in and out of school, Watkins said.

After the awards presentation, two of the winners, Jennifer Bruno of Cesar Chavez Middle School and Amy Hedrick of the Scotts Valley Unified School District, gave a short presentation about their respective programs, then answered questions from the audience.

Bruno started, from scratch, a vegetable garden at the school, a physical education program called "Fitness for Life," and a weekly afterschool farmers market that gives out free fruits and vegetables, purchased from local organic farms, to students. The Fitness for Life program encourages students to be active in non-traditional ways that physical education might leave out, like cycling, martial arts, dance and swimming.

Bruno said the school actually hosted a mini-triathlon to recognize the new abilities of the students who participate in the program.

"You have to market to students," she said. "Why do they go to McDonald's or fast food? Because it's marketed as somewhere fun to go. We just have to do that for our students."

"As we know, times are tough," Kalantari said. "We want to recognize those groups and individuals who made their programs a priority, because the health of our kids is a priority."

The threat of budget cuts was left largely unspoken, but Hedrick explained why health and wellness should continue to be a priority for all schools and programs.

"Every child needs to eat and if you don't have a full stomach you can't learn," Hedrick said. "If you don't have the proper nutrition you can't go out and play football or cheerlead. Nutrition and the wellness policy itself takes on the whole compass of the school, from education to physical activities to the marching band."