

Setting Sail For Wellness

~by Michele Appelgate

A new wellness program designed for middle school students in Mason City has been an educational experience for students, parents, teachers and school staff, community partners and Iowa legislators.

Port Wellness is a free, optional wellness program available to students at John Adams and Roosevelt middle schools in the Mason City Community School District.

The program is funded by Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, who announced in September 2005 that he was dedicating \$2.7 million to 28 public and private organizations through the Harkin Wellness Grant program with the Iowa Department of Public Health. The grants are designed to promote healthier lifestyles by helping local governments, community organizations, and nonprofit organizations develop creative approaches to promote disease prevention and wellness.

The Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health received funding to create and coordinate a wellness program for students at the two middle schools. Public Health officials have been working closely with Mason City Community School District officials to create a program that works with school schedules.

Research shows that healthy students are better learners. Some students are involved in school sports or intramural activities. However, many are not. About 70% of Port Wellness students are in the 6th grade, which is a grade when organized school sports are not yet available.

“Because of Port Wellness, my daughter is participating in activities she may not otherwise have tried. She is learning more about nutrition and the importance of regular physical activity. Our family supports Port Wellness and we recommend it for all students.”

- Cathy Kaune,
Mason City parent



All Port Wellness activities are designed for fun, not for competition. The goal is for students to try the activities and have fun while increasing their daily exercise as well as learning that proper nutrition is important. Some of the activities are new for the students and could develop into lifelong interests for them.

Port Wellness began in the two schools on Jan. 10, 2006. Each week, students at both middle schools are offered two optional and free activities:

1. A fruit and vegetable snack program—On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the students receive a nutri-

tious snack around 10 a.m. With that snack, each student also receives information about the nutritional value of the snack. This program is called “Snack Attack!” and is designed to increase students’ opportunities to eat fresh and dried fruit and fresh vegetables during school. Research shows that healthy students are better learners. Good nutrition can prevent chronic disease, including obesity and diabetes.

2. An after-school program—“Port Wellness” is held most Tuesdays and provides an opportunity for students to learn about healthy eating and fitness choices.

The opportunities are endless. Classes provide a variety of physical activities and wellness education. To date, some of the physical activities have included Frisbee golf, tennis, swimming, ice skating and dancing. Students also had the opportunity to visit a local grocery store with a dietitian. Students and adult volunteers toured the store and learned about nutritional content in foods and how to read nutrition labels, which helps develop lifelong habits for proper nutrition.

Port Wellness also includes a newsletter that is published for each session. It outlines all program details. Photos of the

students at their activities are included in the newsletter, as well as inspiring, educational articles about nutrition and physical activities. The newsletter also promotes parent involvement. The newsletter and other Port Wellness information is available online: www.cghealth.com.

There are many community partners that help make this program possible. The Mason City Community School District is a vital component to the success of Port Wellness. There is one teacher at each of the middle schools who helps coordinate Port Wellness in the schools in addition to an assigned school district administrator. This is an essential part of the program.

Port Wellness Quick Facts

- There are three sessions during the school year, with each lasting 10-12 weeks.
- The average attendance for Session 1 of Port Wellness activities was 70.
- 194.5 hours of volunteer time were donated by community members who offered to help

with Port Wellness activities during Session 1.

- Adult volunteer-to-student ratio is between 1:5 and 1:16, depending on the activity.
- During the week of ITBS testing, leaders at both schools and Port Wellness organizers worked together to rearrange the “Snack Attack” program so students could have a nutritious snack each morning on testing day. This provided more brain power for testing!

Port Wellness Community Partners Include:

Mason City Community School District
Mason City Board of Education
Mason City Parks and Recreation Department
Heart Healthy Cerro Gordo County
Cerro Gordo County Board of Health
Partnership for a Tobacco Free Cerro Gordo County

Mason City Family YMCA
The Rose Bowl
Mason City Youth Task Force
Fort Custer Maze
Mason City Mohawk Hockey Club
North Iowa Hockey Club
Mercy Medical Center North Iowa
ISU/Cerro Gordo County Extension
Girl Scout Council of North Iowa
Wells Fargo Bank
Hy Vee East
Parents

Michele Appelgate is a newly elected member of the Board of Directors for Mason City Community School District and is the Public Information Officer for Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health.