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FEATURED

Sugar Creek among state's 'healthiest'

School receives silver designation from national organization

Scott Girard Unified Newspaper Group 1 hr ago



From right, Meagan Mueller grabs carrots during lunchtime on Tuesday, Sept. 18, while Orion Dvir waits in line behind her.

Photo by Kimberly Wethal

"Taste the Rainbow" brings the thought of a colorful, sugary treat.

But for students at Sugar Creek Elementary School, the Skittles slogan was applied in a different way last year: Rainbow Week featured a variety of fruits and vegetables of all different colors that were celebrated and tried at lunch.

That initiative was one of the features of the school's application to the "America's Healthiest Schools" program, which named Sugar Creek as a Silver-level award winner Monday. It's the first Verona Area School District school to be recognized on the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's list and one of 13 in Wisconsin. There are 461 schools on it nationwide.

"It really feels affirming that a lot of the things that we put in place as a school are not only making a difference with kids but are nationally recognized as doing the right thing," principal Todd Brunner told the Press.

The program measures schools' healthy performance in a variety of categories, including health education, physical education, nutrition services and health promotion for staff. Schools have to submit an application to be included.

Alliance for a Healthier Generation marketing and communications manager Megan Walcek told the Press in an email the school "caught our eye" for a few specific initiatives, including the Rainbow Week event. The others were starting a walking program at recess, forming a healthy schools committee with parents and staff and creating a program encouraging staff to take care of personal wellness needs at least three times a week for 20 minutes.

Julia Stanley, who has been the program coordinator for the Healthy Kids Collaborative of Dane County for six years, worked with Sugar Creek on its programming last year and was impressed with the way the school's leadership embraced the focus.

"They are really showing the link between health and wellness and learning," Stanley said. "Healthy kids make better learners, and they're really putting that into practice."

Healthy focus

The emphasis on healthy habits is present throughout the school, from staff down to students.

Brunner noted that staff meetings tend to include time for physical activity, and their enthusiasm for the different programming is a key part of making it successful, he said.

"Staff are the ones that the kids see and hear," he said. "Our staff are excited about the fun run, so the kids want to go to the fun run."

That run, which began before the healthy schools work last year and is the school's biggest fundraiser, is also a sign of the school's focus, Brunner said.

"It's a family activity that's a healthy activity," he said. "We're not selling cookies or candy bars or wrapping paper. Our fundraiser is running together as a school."

Stanley said that Sugar Creek's example – Oregon High School was the only other Dane County school on the list – can hopefully drive other schools to see the benefits from small actions.

"We're so pleased that they have achieved this and we hope other schools can see that success is not huge," Stanley said. "You can make small improvements and still be successful in this work."

"Even small successes can have a huge effect on a school community."

Brunner said that even with "simple" changes, it's important to have a staff that does "the right things for kids rather than what's easiest for adults" in focusing on establishing long-term habits for their students outside the classroom.

"It's all around trying to create the healthy habits in kids so they live long, healthy lives," Brunner said. "It's not just their brain and how did they do on a test? But what are we teaching them about what's important in life?"

Working together

One of the most important accomplishments for the school toward the recognition was establishing its Healthy Schools Committee, which was formed last September.

The group for the 2017-18 school year included one parent, one counselor, the school nurse, a teacher, three school cooks and Brunner, along with team leader Laurie Tackett. It began its work for the year by attending the Healthy Kids, Healthy Schools Learning Collaborative meeting in September, facilitated by Stanley.

Throughout the year, it facilitated programming like the Sugar Creek Fun Run in October, promoted a districtwide staff "Step Up" challenge in January and presented about "Active Recess" at a statewide school wellness summit in March.

"It's really exciting," Stanley said of the work she saw at the school. "We always use Sugar Creek as one of the ones who is really doing great work from all levels."

Brunner said it was nice to be held up as an example, recalling an outside health group filming their breakfast time to encourage other schools to consider having a universal breakfast after the bell as they do there.

“We have a long ways to grow and go, but again it feels really empowering and encouraging,” he said. “You have other schools turning to you saying, ‘Wow, you’re a little bit further along in this topic than we are, and we’d like to learn from you.’”

It helps to have found groups in Dane County like Stanley’s and the Wisconsin Bike Federation and Safe Routes to Schools, which collaborated for a bicycle safety event last spring.

“There’s a lot of organizations out there that we weren’t aware of,” Brunner said. “They’re available to help schools, you’ve just got to tap into them.”

Contact Scott Girard at ungreporter@wcinet.com and follow him on Twitter @sgirard9.

Award criteria

The areas used by the Alliance for a Healthier Generation to assess America’s Healthiest Schools:

- Health, safety policies and environment
- Health education
- Physical education and other physical activity programs
- Nutrition services
- Health promotion for staff
- Family and community involvement

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Scott Girard