

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Schools to offer prizes for healthy eating

Effort is part of study to fight obesity in kids

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Bill Wippert/Buffalo News Tanashia Bradley takes an apple as she goes through the cafeteria line at Martin Luther King Multicultural Institute.

An ambitious effort to change the attitudes and eating habits of children is taking the cause of good nutrition right to the source: the school cafeteria.

A \$450,000 project, notable for its size and scope, will offer weekly rewards to about 30,000 Buffalo pupils who eat fruits and vegetables at lunch.

The plan, called "Be a Power Eater: The Good Food for Great Kids Program," is designed to improve student health, provide valuable research data and serve as a national model in the growing effort to fight childhood obesity.

"We're trying to get our arms around this issue in a big way," said Gretchen Fierle, interim director of the P2 Collaborative of Western New York, a coalition of medical, educational and community groups that is coordinating the program. "We don't know of anyone who's done anything of this scope in the United States."

When the six-week program is launched in January, small rewards - such as pens, rulers or key chains - will be given to Buffalo students in grades prekindergarten through 8 who had a fruit or vegetable at lunch at least one day that week.

Pupils who eat fruits or vegetables every school day will be eligible for drawings for mountain bikes, portable compact disc players or other items that can promote good health.

A third of the participating schools will take part in a contest in which the top three are rewarded with a schoolwide celebration.

"We want to make it fun and engaging, and elevate their knowledge," Fierle said. The program is confined to Buffalo schools, but Fierle said suburban districts will be urged to launch similar efforts.

More than 30 percent of 6- to 19-year-olds in the United States are overweight; more than 15 percent are obese, according to the American Obesity Association. Researchers say children born today could constitute the first generation in U.S. history with a lower life expectancy than its predecessor.

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The "Power Eater" program is designed to introduce students to better eating habits and nudge them in the right direction.

"We're hoping that, because of the incentives, the kids will take not only their pizza and milk, but also some carrot sticks, orange slices or a salad," said Bridget O'Brien-Wood, food service director for Buffalo Public Schools. For research purposes, the program will be conducted at three levels. Some schools simply will offer the rewards program. Others also will be eligible for the fun fair. And a third group will feature the rewards program and ask youngsters to sign posters pledging to eat better.

By providing those control groups, the P2 Collaborative will be able to determine which approaches work best.

The \$450,000 is being raised largely through a state Health Department grant and contributions from local foundations. Another \$300,000 has been pledged in in-kind services.

Michael Cropp, chairman of the P2 Collaborative and president and chief executive officer of Independent Health, said traditional medical approaches can't solve the childhood obesity problem. "You have to involve the community," he said.

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