

## **Teaching Healthy Eating, Activity Habits Begin at Early Age**

### **Bahia Vista Creates the Recipe for a Healthy School**

*San Rafael, CA* – While junk-food filled vending machines are a thing of the past at most schools in California – it's the law – ordinary schools still use candy and other unhealthy foods for fundraising and celebrations. Bahia Vista Elementary School in San Rafael is extraordinary in a variety of ways, not the least of which are the celebrations that feature healthy snacks instead of sugary fat-filled "treats."

What's happening on campus – currently housed in temporary buildings while a new school is being built complete with kitchen and athletic facilities – is that kids are trying healthy fruits and vegetables straight from the school's garden, which the children help tend. "Kindergartners race each other to be the first to pick lettuce for lunch. As they pick with smiles on their faces and excitement in their eyes, they learn about the vitamins in the lettuce and greens as well and why those vitamins are important," notes the school's Nutrition and Garden Coordinator Karen Holleran. Teri Varbel, a Bahia Vista kindergarten teacher, adds, "The rule is they have to taste everything."

Juan Rodriguez, Bahia Vista's Principal, comments, "Our school-wide focus on nutrition and health was launched approximately four years ago by our parent group because they wanted healthier foods in the school." The Nutrition Wellness Program brought in the Nutrition Educator/Garden Coordinator, and Ellen Szakal, Registered Dietitian/Public Health Nutrition Education Specialist with the Nutrition Wellness Program, began providing nutrition education training, which will meet nutrition and physical activity "competencies" developed by nutrition experts in conjunction with the Department of Education, to the teachers and staff, who in turn teach the kindergarteners. The nutrition education is targeted to specific elementary school ages, beginning with Kindergarten and continuing through each succeeding year until fifth grade. The Nutrition Education Coordinator supports the various classrooms with activities and taste testing around the garden which meet the nutrition and physical activity competencies which have to be met each school year.

Bahia Vista is one of the first schools in the state to tackle both nutrition education and physical activity in a comprehensive manner. The change goes far beyond tweaking the school lunch menus to make them healthier. Szakal provides monthly training sessions for teachers, offering curriculum ideas, books and materials to support interactive projects, as well as ways to assess the results of their teaching. "We're also encouraging teachers to incorporate physical activities into sedentary class lessons, Szakal explains.

Bahia Vista is an extremely low income school in the San Rafael School District. Nearly 100% of the kindergarteners through fifth-graders qualify for free or reduced-price meals, meaning their families earn no more than 185 percent above the federal poverty level. For example, in 2004, a family of four could earn no more than \$19,300 for their children to qualify. More than 90% of the student population is Latino, and 88% of them are classified as “English learners.” But food is a universal language, and thanks to the programs sponsored by the Nutrition Wellness Program, the children are learning about healthy foods they might not have tried in the past.

Linda Armstrong, the Program Coordinator of the Nutrition Wellness Program, adds, “We’re also working with parents and community members, providing information and nutrition education to make sure that there is a bridge between what happens at school and what the children experience at home. We encourage healthy foods at parent meetings, and Bahia Vista goes beyond curriculum enhancements by involving “real life” health lessons in fundraising events, celebrations and other activities involving students.”

Armstrong, who manages the subcontract with Bahia Vista and who is a Registered Dietitian and Public Health Nutritionist, emphasizes that none of these healthy changes could have been made without the whole-hearted support of Principal Rodriguez. She calls Rodriguez “a visionary who has been instrumental in ensuring all of the pieces are brought together – parent education, teacher training, the garden and fulfilling subcontract responsibilities and the physical activity component. Transformation is led from the top.”

For his part, Principal Rodriguez is pleased with the results. “The parents are beginning to understand that one of the biggest ways to ensure the success of their children in school and at for themselves at work is the development of lifelong healthy habits.” As for the kids, “We are changing mind frames and behaviors and at the same time making it fun,” Rodriguez says. Armstrong adds, “You know that we are making a difference when the children began asking their parents for tangerines instead of chips for a snack.”

A grant to the Nutrition Wellness Program from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that is supported by the California Nutrition Network (CNN) has helped the Nutrition Wellness Program fund the nutrition education intervention at Bahia Vista Elementary School. The CNN money pays for books, curriculum and materials and for Nutrition Educator/Garden Coordinator support. In addition, the teachers and principal commit to the time they spend on the Bahia Vista nutrition and physical fitness program. The Marin County Department of Health and Human Services Nutrition Wellness Program funds a Registered Dietitian, who conducts monthly “train the trainer” sessions with Bahia Vista teachers. A supplemental grant to the Nutrition Wellness Program from Kaiser Permanente, San Rafael, helps to support and facilitate the school’s Nutrition Advisory Council.

“Our mandate is to target low-income communities in Marin County to increase fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity,” Armstrong concludes. “Going forward, we are going to follow the original Bahia Vista kindergarten class through fifth grade to see if we have made a difference in their eating habits. And, we will want to track the impact of these children and their families on the community. We know that knowledge alone is not going to change behaviors.”

This material was funded by USDA’s Food Stamp Program. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer. The Food Stamp Program provides nutrition assistance to people with low income. To find out more, contact the Marin Food Stamp Program at (415) 473-3400 extension 5.