

NEWS

Connecticut Department of Education



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Commissioner

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Schools increase focus on health literacy programs

Health and safety are important concepts for children to understand especially in the context of recent cases of MRSA.

When it comes to healthy children, education may be the best medicine. That is why Connecticut public schools are increasing their focus on teaching young people about physical fitness, safety and health. This is part of an initiative by the Connecticut State Department of Education to assist local school districts with a curriculum for health literacy.

Health literacy is defined by the U.S. Institute of Medicine as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information needed to make appropriate health decisions. John Vernon, a health economist at UConn, was quoted recently when he stated that low health literacy costs the country between \$106 billion and \$238 billion not even counting lost work and other effects.

The good news is that there is an organized effort to do something about it.

A year ago, the Connecticut Department of Education released its newest curriculum framework, Healthy and Balanced Living. The framework establishes a structure for health and physical education curriculum in the public schools of the state, and one of the four main components of the curriculum is health literacy.

According to Dr. Jean Mee, Consultant for Physical Education and School Health Education, "The curriculum is based on four lifetime learning outcomes: skills needed in order to live a healthy and balanced life; accessing, evaluating, and using information from various sources to achieve overall wellness; comprehending concepts for a lifetime of well being; and making plans and taking actions that lead to healthy and balanced living. The whole framework provides a blueprint for health education and physical education that equip students to live actively and fully as health-intelligently as possible."

For the past year, the Department of Education has been presenting programs to various audiences across the state describing the framework and helping school district personnel to bring the message home to local schools and communities.

The framework begins by addressing health in early childhood with personal health behaviors like brushing teeth and washing hands; describing relationships between personal health behaviors and well-being during elementary school years; during middle school years describing the interrelationship between positive health behaviors and prevention of injury, illness, disease and premature death; and during high school researching, analyzing factors that increase risk of diseases including diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

Another state initiative aimed at increasing the health literacy of students is the Health Education Assessment Project (HEAP). Connecticut is a national leader in providing professional development for teachers through HEAP and implementing the initiative in elementary, middle and high schools. To date, over 750 school personnel have been trained to use the materials. HEAP reinforces the acquisition of such essential skills as decision making, communication, refusal, negotiation and critical thinking for students.

The Healthy and Balanced Living Curriculum Framework and the Health Education Assessment Project are cutting edge resources that also support the development of literate persons in the context of health and fitness. Many school districts, although not a majority, require that at least one health education course be completed for high school graduation. Some elementary schools have health education teachers to regularly teach health literacy to children in pre-K through sixth grade, although most do not.

For more information about the Healthy and Balanced Living Curriculum Framework, and the Health Education Assessment Project contact Dr. Jean Mee, Consultant for Physical Education and School Health Education at jean.mee@ct.gov or Dr. Bonnie Edmondson, HIV/STD Prevention Education Coordinator and Comprehensive School Health Education Consultant at bonnie.edmondson@ct.gov.

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