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# Health

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## A little 'healthy' competition

■ From one end of the county to another, local educators are focusing on healthy living

By Dee Ann Campbell  
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN — "We're trying to promote healthy living," says Southern Choctaw High School principal Betty McBride. "What better way than through actual participation."

Some are doing it to lose weight. Others are doing it to lower their cholesterol or to combat their diabetes. Some are simply doing it for a healthier body.

But when it comes down to it, all are doing it for one reason ... for healthy living.

For the past few weeks, a healthy living focus has permeated the school system. From one end of the county to the other — from high school to elementary school to central office — there is a system-wide push to lose weight, to eat right, and to get fit.

And the focus is not just a local fad. It came about through a statewide promotion by the Alabama Department of Education to encourage good health for the state's teachers and students.

"It began with changes in the concessions that we sell here," says McBride. "The state set down rules about what we could and could not serve, and now we have healthy snacks."

Last year, the state passed new regulations that changed the types of foods and drinks that are allowed to be sold at schools. The push was an effort to change the eating habits of an increasingly overweight and unhealthy generation of children, with the hope that the new healthier eating habits would last beyond school to the rest of their lives.

But the move has not stopped with the children. This year, the Department of Education has also pushed for healthy living among the adults who teach them.

For some, the healthy living focus means participation in a local chapter of Weight Watchers, with weekly weigh-ins and incentives for reaching their weight loss goals. Some 31 staff and faculty members



Choctaw Sun photos by Dee Ann Campbell  
As part of their healthy living goals, teachers are walking, or performing some type of exercise routine, a minimum of 20 minutes per day.

from local schools and another 18 from the central office are now involved in the Weight Watchers' program.

As an incentive for their weight loss, the health insurance PEEHIP, offered through the state Department of Education, is covering \$65 of the \$150 fee for the educators to take part in the 15-week Weight Watchers' program, plus the possibility to roll over into another 15 weeks under certain circumstances.

This week marks Week 9 for the program for the 31 weight watchers who meet at Southern Choctaw Elementary on Friday afternoons. For them, getting healthy means losing weight, eating right, and dropping inches.

And they have already seen obvious success. Collectively, the weight watchers who meet at SCES have lost about 300 pounds.

But the faculty and staff at Southern Choctaw High School are taking an entirely different approach to the healthy living push — an approach that combines the obvious incentives offered by good health, with a little 'healthy' competition.

It is a program put together by their principal in an effort to join the statewide emphasis, while giving it a little local flavor.

"Part of this move

toward healthiness meant that we were supposed to go through staff development," McBride explains. "I went to a healthy living summit in Montgomery in February and brought that information back to the school."

Following her attendance at the summit, McBride put together a plan to get her faculty and staff involved. Her first move was to share with her staff the high points of the summit, as well as some significant statistics that she felt were eye-openers.

"In particular, I shared with them the fact that for years the expected life span was increasing," says McBride. "But now it is beginning to decrease because of health factors that we need to get under control."

Among the factors that emphasize the need for healthy lifestyles are alarming statistics about the incidences of diabetes, high blood pressure, and obesity.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, over 72 million Americans age 20 and over have high blood pressure — nearly 1 in 3 adults. Diabetes is also becoming increasingly prevalent, with 20.8 million people already diagnosed with the disease and another 14.6 million suspected to be undiagnosed.

And Alabamians, in



Teachers involved in Weight Watchers are given rewards for reaching certain weight loss goals during the 15-week program.

*"We've got people moving who haven't moved this much in years."*

-- Judy Franks  
SCHS Team Captain

particular, are plagued with problems associated with obesity. The state ranks number one in percentage of the population that are considered obese — 28.4%.

In putting together a plan for her staff to combat these problems, McBride not only included components that lead to good health, but also added competition between staff members as an additional incentive for participation.

"I came up with the idea of having competing teams," she said. "We drew for teams randomly, and for team captains."

A total of 3 teams were formed, consisting of 9 to 10 members per team, with points earned by each member based on pre-set goals for eating, drinking, and exercising.

"We are emphasizing three or four good points for healthy living," McBride says, "including exercising, eating right, and drinking water and milk."

Each team member is scored on a point system based on the accomplish-

ment of their preset objectives, including consuming 16 ounces of water, 3 servings of milk, and 4 to 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day, as well as exercising for at least 20 minutes. The scores of teams members are combined for an overall team score, which is then used to determine the winning team.

"Some of the team members are trying to lose weight," says Team Captain Judy Franks, whose team has already logged an impressive number of points in the competition. "Some are on blood pressure medication, and some are diabetics. But for some, it's been a long time since they were healthy enough to walk from one end of the school to the other."

Now, after a few weeks into the program, the faculty is seeing some results.

"We've got people moving who haven't moved this much in years," says Franks. "One teacher has seen a drop in blood pressure, and

others have lost weight." "I take this seriously," adds Franks, who is now walking 4 miles each day. "For me, I want to lose weight. I have diabetes in my family, and I know it's linked to being overweight. I don't want to live with that for the rest of my life."

The faculty's healthy living competition is also having a positive effect on the students.

"Kids are asking questions," says McBride. "They are keeping track of what we are doing. We may even put together teams of students in the future."

The Weight Watchers', too, say that the students are catching on to the idea.

"The kids are noticing," says Tracie Kelley, an SCHS teacher who is participating in the Weight Watchers program. They'll say, "Hey, you're losing weight!" or "Those pants have got to go. They're too loose!"

Overall, the push for healthy living has affected the students in other ways as well. Their new snack menu, for example, has meant a mandated change in what they eat and drink. But, according to McBride, they've adjusted well.

"We have not seen a decline in the volume of snack sales at all since we began selling only healthy snacks," she explains. "And I've been pleased with the sales of bottled water among the students."

The program among the faculty at SCHS is slated to continue through March. At the end of the month, McBride is planning a health fair as well as a celebration and awards ceremony, complete with medals and accolades for the winning teams.

But both Franks and McBride say that winning medals and finishing in first place, although it will be fun, is not the primary goal. Rather, it is an overall improvement in their health, and in the health of the children, that is the ultimate objective.

"If we can bring one person's blood pressure down, or help one person lose 10 pounds, or get someone moving who doesn't," says Franks, "and at the same time if we can get these kids to see us doing it, we've accomplished something."

"Sometimes health kicks will wane," admits McBride. "But hopefully we will all take something from this that will stay with us for life."

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