

# Shasta County, California

## Shasta Schools-Public Health Partnership for Health and Education

By Francesca Wright

*Located in the heart of Northern California, Shasta County extends from Butte County to the Oregon border, covering 3,850 square miles, 40% held by federal and state government and a population of 178,300*

### **Background**

Shasta County, like the rest of the nation, is facing an epidemic of childhood obesity. The Center for Public Health Advocacy data show that about one out of four children in Shasta County are overweight or obese. “The epidemic points to two of the most serious public health problems facing California today: unhealthy diets and low levels of physical activity among our children. If policymakers ignore this crisis, Californians will face skyrocketing rates of preventable chronic diseases and rapidly escalating costs of medical care, workers’ compensation, and lost productivity.”

When the Shasta Public Health Department (SPHD) considered this epidemic during a regular strategic planning process, they knew it was preventable and they knew their natural partners. When public health wants to reach children and youth, they have a track record with schools.

### **Partnership for Health and Education**

Initially a series of meetings were held with school personnel, administrators, and school board members to bring the obesity epidemic “home” to Shasta County. Presentations highlighted the importance of good nutrition and physical activity and their contribution to children’s health, student behavior, attendance and academic performance. Schools recognized the need to address the obesity issue at the school district level, but they lacked the technical expertise and the funding to initiate changes in the nutrition and physical activity environment.

The largest school district, Redding School District (RSD), had already worked with public health staff to define a commitment to wellness in the district’s strategic plan. Superintendent Renae Dreier approached public health with the idea of stationing a health educator in her district. Using existing grant funding, RSD entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Health Department which included out-stationing a community education specialist and forming a district-wide school health council. This MOU has been continued to present date with support from new Superintendent Diane Kempley.

The district revitalized its physical education program. After researching various models, they selected a researched based program called SPARK (Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids). All elementary school teachers in the district were trained and used the SPARK curriculum during the ’04-’05 school year. Teachers reported that the non-competitive values had the added benefit of improving classroom behavior.

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The district-wide school health council initiated additional programs and policy changes: education sessions for teachers; lunchtime intramurals; improved snack bar offerings; and teacher pedometer walking clubs.

Next, the Health Department and the Shasta County Office of Education (SCOE) established a Scope of Work to support the smaller school districts with support from SCOE Superintendent Carol Whitmer. This included hiring staff and forming a governing council, called the Health Education Collaborative. The Collaborative hosts monthly nutrition and physical activity forums and is currently helping districts develop local wellness policies to meet USDA guidelines.

Some schools have established health councils of parents, teachers, facilities maintenance staff and service providers. These councils work on nutrition and activity policy, increased access to healthy food, and physical changes around campus. By working in small groups, with a focus of personal or professional interests and with the support of the school principals and superintendents, progress is happening.

## **Accomplishments**

Success in Shasta County has been broadly demonstrated. Gateway District approved a groundbreaking nutrition policy (Anderson High School District removed all junk food and soda a year before legislative requirements. Sequoia Middle School now offers healthy snack bar options at its sporting events. Six districts and SCOE have passed board policies.

Two school districts, Columbia Elementary and North Cow Creek won the State Superintendent Challenge Awards. Some of their innovations include: having nutrition, gardening and food service integrated into academic areas such as English, Math and Science; providing parent-student nutrition workshops; creating cafeteria environments that promote healthy nutrition; limiting fundraisers to nutritionally appropriate foods or utilizing non-food items; incorporating physical education into academic areas; limiting use of electronic entertainment; and enhancing current physical education programs.

## **Challenges**

The ongoing challenge is sufficient resources.

- Nutritious food has a lower profit margin.
- California cost of living is not currently factored in USDA reimbursement rates.
- Cafeterias are expected to run in the black.

Terri Fields Hosler, Deputy Director for Shasta County Public Health states “School boards should rethink their approach to school nutrition programs and look at cafeterias as centers for nutrition, learning labs to be financially supported like any other academic curriculum or athletic program. Healthier kids are ‘in their classroom seats’ drawing down ADA reimbursement, and perform better on standardized tests. Isn’t it time we support school food service for their impact on the school’s financial and academic bottom line?”

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## Lessons

- **Co-Locate Staff** - Bring the technical expertise of health educators and nutritionists to the schools. Integrate them into the school district so that they are seen as an insider and so that they can help develop policies that will work for the districts.
- **Use Local Expertise** - As the program expanded to more districts, staff was recruited from both education and public health. Employees kept the same employer and benefit package.
- **Focus on the Goal and Customize** - The activities and programs varied in different communities and school districts, but the purpose remained to reduce childhood obesity. School health councils can help assess and define the appropriate focus for their district.
- **Coordinate** - Have staff responsible for overall coordination. Schools need this support from public health. They want to create healthier environments, but often school personnel do not have the time or the resources to make this a reality.
- **Evolve** - If a council is no longer effective, consider a new format. If a policy isn't working, rewrite it. This is new territory. As new models are being developed, it is inevitable that we will need to readjust.
- **Use what works.** In this case, the Public Health Department purchased a research-based curriculum package recommended by the Surgeon General.

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