

Posted: Wednesday, August 19, 2015 2:00 a.m.

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## Grant to fund “wellness champions”

Each school in Muskogee Public Schools (MPS) will get a “wellness champion” to help students and faculty get healthy this year.

The champions will be funded by a \$20,000 grant the district received from the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust (TSET). The Trust was created as a long-term strategy to improve the state’s health and is funded through settlement of a 1998 multi-state lawsuit against the tobacco industry.

Representatives of TSET and the Muskogee Turning Point Coalition presented the grant and a Healthy Schools plaque to the Muskogee Board of Education at its regular meeting Tuesday. The grant funds not only the wellness champions program but a fitness center for MPS staff and faculty.

“We know that by having a healthier school environment, we are going to make it better for our children that attend that school district, and also for the staff,” said TSET Healthy Schools program manager Sharon Howard. “And, ultimately, even the parents, because as the children learn stuff, they come home to teach the parents.”

Howard said wellness champions will work on wellness efforts at each school.

“They will work on what is called the school’s health index, which shows how well a school is doing as far as health measures go,” Howard said. “It looks at eight components of a school’s health.”

She listed the components: Physical activity or physical education; child nutrition; a safe and healthy school environment; health services, health education, psychological school services and counseling; employee health; family and community involvement.

MPS Nutrition Educator Karah Lehman said the champions will organize Healthy and Fit School Advisory Committee meetings, apply for TSET grants “and, most of all, lead their students, peers and coworkers in building a healthier school atmosphere and community.”

Leman said she learned about the wellness champion idea a few years ago at a school nutrition conference.

Two MPS staff members were appointed school wellness champions Tuesday—Damon Beckers at Ben Franklin Science Academy and Denise Dunn at Whittier Elementary. They will receive stipends of \$150 a year. Other champions will be selected later.

Lehman said the staff at the Board of Education Service and Technology Center as well as the child nutrition/maintenance/technology departments will have wellness champions.

“As this grant can be applied for yearly, we hope to continue to grow our wellness efforts and provide more opportunities in the years to come,” she said.

The school employee fitness center is in Muskogee High School’s new indoor athletic facility and will be available free when no classes are scheduled, Lehman said.

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