

OSU Family Health and Nutrition Clinic reaches out to advance Tulsa area children's health

The Oklahoma State University Family Health and Nutrition Clinic is taking its mission to improve the health of Tulsa-area children into public schools.

Dr. Colony Fugate, medical director of the clinic, and dietitian Sara Malone are members of the Tulsa County Wellness Partnership and actively participate in the coalition's advocacy efforts to impact policies that promote healthy school environments.

"We don't see our clinic as just this space. We're extending it into the community," said Malone. "Our participation as members of the coalition is to provide a medical perspective in conjunction with the expertise of other members on the School Health and Policy committee to advocate for policy changes in schools."

The Tulsa County partnership is sponsored by the Family Health coalition and operates with a Communities of Excellence grant from the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust. Its partners work to improve health and nutrition in three areas: schools, workplaces and communities.

Through the partnership, Fugate and Malone have worked with other members of the committee to address needed changes in existing wellness policies among local school districts. The committee is working with administrative staff at Jenks, Tulsa and Union public schools to provide technical assistance in updating and strengthening district wellness policies to align with the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. That act reauthorized child nutrition funding and set new nutrition standards for schools.

"Schools' wellness policies were outdated, but not because administrators were neglectful," Malone said. "School districts have so much more on their plate these days."

The school districts were receptive to the Tulsa County Wellness Partnership's offer of support and eager to take advice on ways to encourage better health and nutrition among students.

"They're really trying their hardest and putting forth great effort because they really care about their kids," Fugate said.

As a dietitian, Malone set out to observe meal times at schools and other activities so she could give schools feedback on improvements they could make. In addition to the nutritional value of the food districts served, she also focused on other aspects that affect child wellness.

Malone noticed that at many schools, students had limited time to eat meals and often returned to class hungry because they spent most of the lunch period waiting in line to get their food.

"For many, hunger and food insecurity is an issue. And if kids are hungry, they have more difficulty learning," she said.



Katie Bonds, D.O., pediatrics resident; second row, Kerry Morgan, clinical instructor of health and human performance at OSU-Tulsa, Sara Malone, dietitian at the OSU Family Health and Nutrition Clinic, Colony Fugate, D.O., clinical associate professor of pediatrics and medical director of the OSU Family Health and Nutrition Clinic, Meghan Croteau, D.O., pediatric resident, Anjali Chaudhari, D.O., pediatrics resident; and back row, Carly Sorenson, D.O. pediatrics resident, participated in a back-to-school event at Eugene Field Elementary in August.

Nationwide, the average amount of time students have to eat school lunch is eight minutes, Malone said.

“Children need 20 minutes of sit-down time to eat,” she said. “Just think of a first-grader eating an apple. That will take a good seven or eight minutes alone.”

Fugate puts much of her energy into the exercise part of the equation. As schools nationwide focus more on academics and testing, the number of physical education programs or the amount of time a child spends in physical education class have been reduced, she said.

Exercise and fitness are relevant to physical health, as well as academic performance, she said.

“There is a significant connection between learning and physical activity,” Fugate said. “Research has shown that students improve academic performance when they are more physically active.”

Malone pointed out a notable example of this connection. Nearly a decade ago, Paul Zientarski, then physical education coordinator at Naperville Central High School in the Chicago suburbs, helped implement an enhanced physical education program focused on personal fitness rather than sports.

Students were hooked to heart rate monitors and engaged in cardio workouts with the goal of reaching a targeted heart rate. Rather than large-scale sports, they played downsized forms of games, such as four-on-four soccer, to give students more opportunity to be vigorous in their exercise. The students showed significant improvement in reading and math scores.

Malone said there is a body of research showing a positive correlation between exercise and academic performance.

“Why would a high school do that, you wonder? It’s because they know it works,” she said. “Different forms of physical activity activate different parts of the brain.”

With the help of the OSU Family Health and Nutrition Clinic, school administrators also work toward becoming an Oklahoma Certified Healthy School. That certification enables schools to apply for state incentive grants to further fund their nutrition and physical fitness efforts.

“Outreach and advocacy are part of the Family Health and Nutrition Clinic’s mission that ultimately affects the health of thousands of children in our area,” Fugate said. “And we believe we are making a difference.”