

OSU Family Clinic Focuses on Children

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 the 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," says 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"Schools' wellness policies were outdated, but not because administrators were neglectful," Malone says. "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 says.

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 says.

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