

DAILY NEWS

New focus on wellness for students

IF THERE IS AN IDEA whose time has come, Health Corps is it.

With obesity, diabetes and hypertension rising at alarming rates, Health Corps, an innovative program to educate schoolchildren about healthy living, has arrived just in time.

"I am thrilled and surprised about how much people want to help," said Dr. Mehmet Oz, a Columbia Presbyterian Hospital heart surgeon and the founder of Health Corps. "Chancellor [Joel] Klein, the teachers' union, the school principals — they all have looked past little problems and supported the program."

In its third year, the program is in schools in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and California. Next year it will expand further. The idea is to go national.

The program addresses nutrition, mental health, exercise and overall awareness of the value of bodies and minds.



ALBOR RUIZ

Oz, a celebrity author frequently featured on Oprah Winfrey's talk show, says that he started Health Corps because

every year his patients were getting younger.

"I am not that old — I just turned 46 — but when I was training as a surgeon I don't remember anyone younger than 50 with this kind of problems," Oz said. "But in recent years, I have been seeing more and more 25-year-olds with clogged arteries. And I began to think about how I could make a difference."

Health Corps is described as a new way of thinking about healthy living. It works with young volunteers who get a two-year stipend to educate children in schools on wellness awareness.

"We run well-being workshops that include nutrition and fitness, we try to make them fun to inspire kids not to be sedentary," said Jessica Crawford, 25, the Health Corps Coordinator at Cathedral, a Catholic all-girl high school on E. 56th St. in Manhattan. Most of its 860 students are Hispanic or black and they come from all boroughs. One hundred and twenty are enrolled in Health Corps.

"Kids play video games generated by bicycle exercises," said Crawford, who will enter medical school next year. "They play Dance Dance Revolution, a game to get the body moving. We just elected a DDR queen, and students are excited."

Teaching nutrition — educating kids about healthy foods, reducing their sugar intake, and why fad diets do more harm than good — is a big part of the program.

"Now, we only eat whole wheat bread at home," said Kamille Vargas, a vivacious 17-year-old born in New York to Puerto Rican parents, who is the Health Corps student president at Cathedral. "I have told many friends about what we learn and some of them are changing their eating habits."

Fortunately, changing eating habits does not always mean giving up the food you like.

"At George Washington HS, the majority of the students are Dominican," said Leslie Marino, 25, also a future doctor, who is the Health Corps coordinator at the Washington Heights institution and a great advocate of veggie burgers.

Founded by Oz, Health Corps is sponsored by Columbia and Touro College's Children's Health Education Foundation, which developed the curriculum and trains the coordinators.

Stephen Phillips, director of the Children's Health Education Foundation of Touro College, said, "Health Corps is a public health collaboration between Touro College and Columbia University/Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Everybody talks about school-age obesity, but we are doing something about it."

"This program," said Oz, "is about being aware of the most precious gift we have: our body."

For information, go to www.healthcorps.net.

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