

**STARTING YOUNG:** Students from Northern Lincoln Elementary School show off their yoga skills at the R.I. Healthy Kids Coalition annual breakfast. (photo)

The Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition has a deadline fast approaching. By October 2012, all schools in Rhode Island will have a performance-based physical education curriculum; wellness programs for staff; and all food and beverages on school campuses will meet the nation's dietary guidelines.

It's a lofty goal, but Coalition leaders are confident that they will meet those benchmarks and more.

"Rhode Island has been able to make positive inroads in nutrition, physical education and staff wellness. We have established Rhode Island as a front-runner in providing nutritious food in schools," said Rosemary Reilly-Chammat, Ed.D, the adolescent health manager in the Rhode Island Department of Health (HEALTH). "We've come a long way in 10 years, and there's still a lot of work ahead of us."

The progress made and the work remaining were both discussed Thursday at the Coalition's annual Healthy Schools Breakfast. Reilly-Chammat explained that it takes collaboration across specialties and districts in order to make schools – and students – healthier. Her mantra last week was, "When I contribute, we keep getting stronger," a phrase she had the audience of educators and public policymakers repeat in singsong.

According to HEALTH officials, two-thirds of deaths in adults over the age of 25 are related to cancer, diabetes or cardiovascular issues. These diseases are caused, in large part, by four preventable risks: tobacco use, poor diet, lack of exercise and obesity. Educating students early, then, can help the state avoid preventable deaths since, for example, obese teens have an 80 percent chance of being obese as an adult.

"Food needs to be viewed as part of the ecology of education," Reilly-Chammat said. "Physical activity during the school day has also been shown to improve academic performance."

She also highlighted how emphasizing locally grown products through farm-to-school programs stimulates the economy.

"Buy Local" has been a statewide initiative, but has trickled down to school districts as well. Becky Bessette, MS, RD, is the administrator of Child Nutrition Programs for the Rhode Island

Department of Education. She has seen the buy-local approach to improving nutrition thrive across the state.

Districts are running scratch cooking programs for students and staff and serving local produce at lunch. Bessette showed photos from Sodexo of locally grown potatoes that had been roasted, from Chartwells of spaghetti with clam sauce, and from Aramark of tortilla twists. Gone from cafeterias are vending machines and a la carte items that included soda, ice cream and candy bars.

“These are not the same old school menus, that's for sure,” she said.

“I know they like the food. They love what they're eating,” added Linda Mendonca, a school nurse teacher in Pawtucket.

In her district, she often eats with the students to see their reactions to dishes like veggie lo mein and vegetarian chili. Personally, she enjoys the yogurt bar and muffins made from scratch.

With these options, it's no surprise that Pawtucket was awarded the 2011 Annual Award of Honor at the event. In addition to their nutrition efforts, Pawtucket offers after-school fitness classes, local lunch days and is a major participant in Shape Up RI.

Deborah Cylke, superintendent of Pawtucket Schools, was honored to accept the award. Cylke is not originally from Rhode Island and believes the Healthy Schools Coalition has an uphill battle to forge nutritious habits in children.

“It's a challenging state in which to be healthy,” she said, recalling a conversation she overheard her 18-year-old son having about the number of donut shops in Rhode Island and the addictive quality of fried foods like whole belly clams.

Cylke also believes that the economy, and in turn poverty, is a contributing factor to poor nutrition, and said “good jobs are a path out of poverty.”

Another initiative run through the Coalition is planting gardens at schools. The Johnston School Department was congratulated on their efforts on the project. There is a garden at every school in the district there, and a group of students met weekly throughout the summer to sustain the initiative.

Bessette called the program “innovative” and encouraged other districts to follow suit. Currently, Whole Foods Market is offering a \$2,000 grant to help districts plant and sustain gardens.

The Healthy Schools Coalition is likewise focused on physical education. Districts are dedicating many professional development hours to creating P.E. curriculum, which Narragansett teacher Deborah Ranaldi believes will be as important in creating healthy lifestyles as nutrition.

“Students will apply this knowledge to healthy habits for a lifetime,” she said.

Neta Taylor-Post, director of healthcare initiatives for the YMCA of Greater Providence, encouraged educators to get in the driver's seat for their health as well.

“We have to take time to take care of ourselves,” she said.

Taylor-Post detailed the Y’s fitness programs as well as services offered to individuals who are at risk of getting diabetes. Individuals who are overweight or obese, had gestational diabetes when pregnant, have high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, are relatively inactive, have a family history of diabetes or are over the age of 45 could qualify for Y programming.

Perhaps the highlight of the breakfast, however, came during a yoga break led by Debra Reddy and Paula Paluch of Northern Lincoln Elementary School. The teachers stood by as more than two-dozen students showed off their yoga skills. It was a hit with the audience, and Paluch insists that these types of activities can impact a student’s overall academic performance.

“We've found yoga helps them focus. It helps them to be balanced,” she said.

For more information on the Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition, visit [www.kidsfirstri.org](http://www.kidsfirstri.org).