

School Leaders Learn of Healthy Meal, PE standards to take effect in '09

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Hundreds of school officials converged on the Warwick Crowne Plaza Tuesday morning for the Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition's annual "Breakfast for School Leaders."

More than 300 superintendents, principals, school physicians, school committee members, school business managers, food service directors, community wellness partners and parent leaders attended, representing all 36 school districts in the state.

Karin Wetherill, of Kids First and one of the coordinators behind the event, was encouraged by the turnout.

"The continued growth in attendance is a real highlight," she said. "We continue to have real leaders all coming out to hear messages and work together to bring about change in our schools."

This year's breakfast featured Narragansett Pier Middle School seventh-grader Leah Benz reading her essay, "PE & Me," which was an award-winner in the American Heart Association essay contest and the South Kingstown Public Schools presented the coalition's Award of Honor, but the real focus of the breakfast meeting was to discuss the new Rhode Island Nutritional Requirements for school meals (RINR 2009) and the new Rhode Island Standards Based

Physical Education Law.

Dorothy Brayley, co-chair of the R.I. Healthy Schools Coalition, spoke about the new meal standards.

"The RINR 2009 program is designed to encourage the consumption of more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes and less sodium in the school meals programs, as well as to discourage the consumption of less nutritious snack foods in place of such well-balanced meals," she said. "RINR criteria exceed the federal requirements for reimbursable meals and snacks."

As part of the new standards, all grains served, such as rice, bread, pasta and cereal, as part of reimbursable meals and snacks, will be at least 50 percent whole grain, and 50 percent of all grains served will be 100 percent whole grain. In the realm of fruits and vegetables, the minimum offerings will be included: two servings of fruit and/or vegetables at breakfast, three servings at lunch and one serving as an after school snack. Three different fruits and five different non-fried vegetables will be offered each week, and programs will utilize locally grown and harvested produce when available. Also, all items served via a la carte, snack bar or vending machines must meet the coalition's nutrition guidelines.

Wetherill said new standards will go into effect in September of 2009, requiring all school districts in the state to abide by them, but she said there are already 12 districts that have begun following those guidelines.

“Aramark, a food service vendor that has contracts with seven districts in the state, has decided to make these requirements part of their contract,” she said. “And we’ve had five other districts that chose to voluntarily write the RINR [requirements] into their contracts.”

Wetherill said she’s excited about the farm-to-school movement.

“A lot of the food will come from our fields, our cows and our chickens. Schools will be able to provide the most delicious and nutritious meals while also supporting our local farms,” she said. “We’re seeing a real response from the community and from the students. The providers are working hard on that and they’re excited to offer these products in the schools.”

Wetherill said one of the challenges to providing locally grown produce and other items in the schools is the vendor’s ability to keep up with demand.

“The suppliers need to keep pace with what’s being demanded,” she said.

Wetherill said some of the vendors are going one step further and asking farmers to get involved by requesting more produce and asking them to plant and produce more items to be used in schools.

“That’s one of the radically new and exciting opportunities,” she said.

Kristen Coutoulakis, health and physical education teacher in the East Providence school district, spoke about the Rhode Island Standards Based PE curriculum in a presentation called “It’s not a Choice, It’s the Law!”

Representatives Joseph McNamara and Eileen Naughton are among the sponsors of the new law, which says that all children in grades one through 12 of public schools must receive health and physical education instruction that averages at least 20 minutes in each school day. Also part of the law, beginning Sept. 1, 2012, the required physical education curriculum shall be based on the physical education standards of the Rhode Island Physical Education Framework: Supporting Physically Active Lifestyles through Quality Physical Education. According to the Rhode Island Department of Education Web site, www.ride.ri.gov, those standards include: 1. Demonstrates competency in many movement forms and proficiency in a few movement forms, 2. Applies movement concepts and principles to the learning and development of motor skills, 3. Understands the implications of and the benefits derived from involvement in physical activity, 4. Applies physical activity-related skills and concepts to maintain a physically active lifestyle and a health enhancing level of physical fitness, 5. Demonstrates responsible personal and social behavior in physical activity settings and 6. Understands that internal and external environments influence physical activity.

“Some school districts are already following these standards, but it will be great to have everyone on the same page,” Coutoulakis said. “The standards should be posted in all classrooms, including the gym, and should be referenced in instruction.”

Coutoulakis said in order for a quality PE program in Rhode Island to be

successful, it requires legislative backing, standards that can be followed, performance tools used for assessment and knowledge.

“We have legislative backing and standards that can be followed, we have performance tools that we can use for assessment at our finger tips and we have the knowledge to make a lifetime of fitness health, [all of which] equals the whole child not left behind,” she said.

Wetherill said she didn’t see many challenges, if any, to aligning the PE curriculum standards to each district, other than making sure the curriculums are developed and the quality is there.

Commissioner of Education Peter McWalters said he was pleased with Tuesday’s turnout.

“To see how many people are [here] having breakfast and have a committed interest in health education is wonderful,” he said. “[Eating healthy], this is something each and every one of us as responsible adults needs to do to be good role models for the students.”

Director of Secondary Education Victor Mercurio was also in attendance but could only stay for a short time.

“Based on what was presented, we’re doing what the state expectation is, which is a positive thing,” he said. “I didn’t see anything inconsistent with what we’ve discussed previously. I thought it was very positive.”

Superintendent Peter Horoschak, who also stopped briefly at the breakfast, said he too is pleased with what he heard.

“I think it’s a well organized and important initiative in the state to have legislation causing everyone to follow with this,” he said. “This will benefit the kids immensely over time.”