

## The Need

Many ingredients go into making healthy kids. Two of the most important are good food and physical activity. Most children today don't get enough of either. The result is an increase in chronic illnesses, including Type II diabetes and childhood obesity. Schools are the public tables, at which many children eat two or even three meals a day. School is also a place that children spend a good portion of their waking hours. Research shows that transforming school food and increasing physical activity improves student health and academic performance, and lowers absenteeism. The NE Iowa FFI is helping schools meet the growing need to improve school wellness. Together, we grow healthy kids!

## Health Impacts

### Goals & Objectives:

The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative promotes healthy local food and increased physical activity opportunities in communities throughout six counties in NE Iowa. We specifically invest in school wellness and messaging to create healthier schools in 20 public and seven parochial school districts. These efforts will help reduce childhood obesity. The specific objectives of this project are:

- Build local capacity for school wellness teams in NE Iowa and integrate food and fitness work into the core mission of these teams.
- Design and implement a regional messaging campaign to reach consumers, especially parents and youth.

## School Wellness Teams (SWTs)

The FFI School Wellness Outreach Team is a work group of the NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI) that sustains and builds relationships with school wellness teams (SWTs), as well as educate school communities to invigorate teachers, students and parents.

In this program year, the team was led by Luther College, a Core Partner of FFI. Resource contacts, consisting of three AmeriCorps and FFI staff members, were assigned to individual schools to guide them through the action plan process as well as build capacity with team members, youth teams, food service, and others. The work was supported by funding from the WK Kellogg Foundation and the Wellmark Foundation.

We believe that working with parents and teachers will decrease barriers that wellness teams encounter as they work to change school policies. The School Wellness Outreach Team seeks community champions to not just SERVE on a SWTs, but also foster healthier school climates. In workshops and wellness meetings we educate about the need for change and how change happens together. We lead with the notion that wellness matters. However, we recognize not enough people have information about why making schools healthier is important.

### Our Objectives:

***Connect with designated school and community members across the region to actively implement wellness policies.***

The NE Iowa FFI has had great success engaging SWTs over the last year using the action plan instrument. Fourteen public schools completed action plans for the 2010/11 school year, with 13 of those schools meeting an average of 4 times throughout the year to address and implement the goals outlined in their action plan. In addition, the Outreach Team supported SWTs who did not submit an action plan. This prepared the SWT to complete an action plan in Spring 2011.



As of June 1, 2011, 16 schools submitted action plans for the 2011/12 school year with a commitment to meet a minimum of 6 times per year. A parochial school joined wellness efforts with the partnering public school in their community. Most of the SWTs have met frequently since the start of the 2011/12 school year.

### **Strengthening relationships with schools...**

The School Wellness Outreach Team is comprised mostly of service members are with Iowa State of Promise AmeriCorps and the new national FoodCorps program. This year, Resource Contacts (RC) have opportunities to build relationships with schools by educating, facilitating SWT meetings and workshops, as well as resource gathering. Each RC is assigned three school districts. They spend a considerable amount of time at schools— attending SWT meetings, providing nutrition and physical activity education, supporting local food procurement and school gardens, as well as helping implement action plan goals within the school(s). We believe a model where AmeriCorps and FoodCorps members serve in multiple school districts will eventually be fully supported by schools. We plan to strengthen and showcase this potential partnership this upcoming year.

### **Create a school wellness team toolkit.**

This is the second year of the school wellness action plans. We modified the second-round action plan to include more school ownership of wellness activities, as opposed to encouraging schools to merely 'sign-up' for multiple FFI trainings and projects. Also, the 2011/12 action plan requires a SWT to submit their school wellness policy. By May 2012, we are working with schools to align their district wellness policies with the action plan goals. This may require schools to change their policies to support wellness efforts in schools.

While school wellness teams were forming, the School Wellness Outreach Team did not discuss school wellness policies. It was too early to enter into those discussions. The teams needed to focus on engagement and education. Some schools have advance quickly and are ready to address policies. Others recognize that their policies fall short either on paper or in practice and are working on a vision statement.



### **Create an orientation of FFI for school wellness teams that includes the benefits of changing the school environment.**

The School Wellness Outreach Team faces hurdles with the school environment— mostly financial constraints and lack of time. It is difficult to persuade people that change has a multitude of benefits. We continue to work with SWTs about why wellness matters. We are engaging both youth and parents in this effort, and are seeking youth engagement in wellness team education. In addition, we are targeting schools that have not submitted action plans to determine the best strategies to engage them.

### **Coordinate media outreach with schools to increase public awareness of school wellness teams and policies.**

Great partnerships have been started in three pilot communities, in which wellness team sponsored events coinciding with the Regional Messaging Campaign— including parent education nights and school events. Print materials for SWTs such as *What's up with Wellness?* newsletters, parent surveys, websites and promotional materials have been distributed.

Because the first year of this project was focused on the formation of SWTs, raising community awareness of SWT has been delayed. As a result, we now have enough information collected for public consumption about what SWTs are doing.

**Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative**  
[www.iowafoodandfitness.org](http://www.iowafoodandfitness.org)

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November 2011