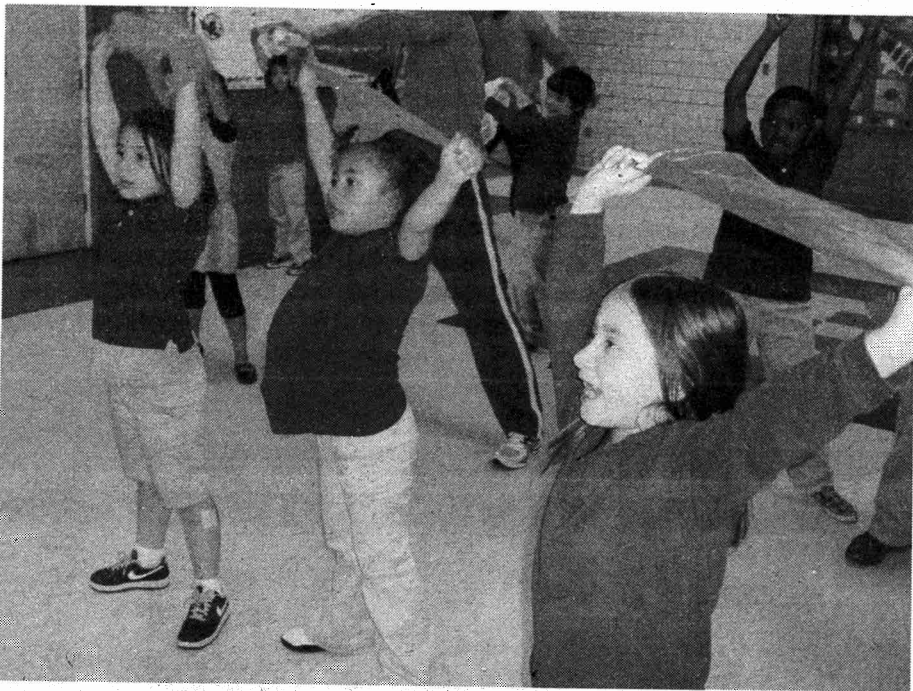


A good habit to CATCH

New program teaches children to eat and live better

by Tracey Weiss



The CATCH Healthy Habits program helps students learn not only to eat better foods, but to add exercise to their lifestyle, which is disguised as something fun, like stretching with scarves.

There's a big difference between whoa, slow and go. Those are the terms used to educate children about the foods they eat in a program new to the area called CATCH Healthy Habits.

"It's a good program," said David Johnston, who has been volunteering to work with students since the eight-week program was initiated this year at Global Communications Academy and Batchelder Elementary School, both in Hartford.

Johnston, a West Hartford resident, has decades of experience working with and helping children and teenagers and has most recently been substitute teaching in the town's schools.

At Conard High School, for

instance, he said. "I've eaten in the cafeteria and seen the healthy choices and it's usually just me and one other student at the salad bar." That's why he likes the CATCH program and calls it "well conceived and designed."

The crux of the program is about pairing adults over age 50 with children to encourage healthier eating habits and physical activity.

The result is a village-like appeal thanks to volunteers like Johnston and others who make it a part of the after-school program to serve snacks, engage the children in grades 1-3 or 3-5 in exercise and games, and participate in everything the youngsters do.

"I get as much of a kick out of it as they do," he said.

"I'm capable of reverting to my childhood in an instant. The second time I volunteered at the program a child walked up to me and said, 'Mr. Johnston, are we gonna catch a healthy habit today?' It's good. Maybe something gets implanted in their brains."

CATCH, which stands for Coordinated Approach To Child Health, is offered in partnership with the Community Renewal Team's Retired Senior Volunteer program and sponsored by the Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation. The umbrella organization for CATCH is The Oasis Institute, which last year operated CATCH in 18 cities.

CRT is a designated community action agency for Middlesex and Hartford Counties. Its mission is to change lives and create opportunity for individuals and families.

"CATCH is an early innovative approach to address health and wellness," said Renee Hamel, the program's coordinator.

"It's a more creative way to present food and make it fun and special. We have great snacks like fruit kebabs. We play a game called 'Cereal of the Stars' and we do lessons about the food. There's even a song about fruit salad."

The most important lesson is teaching the children the difference between healthy and not-so-healthy foods.

"Go foods have little salt, sugar or

are not processed," Hamel said. "Whoa foods are the opposite of that."

Slow foods fall in the middle of the two categories.

"Then we all play games and do exercises," she said.

"Kids don't get to play outside like they used to, or they're inside, watching television or playing video games."

On a typical day, the children eat cereal with strawberries and milk and one of the volunteers asked "why are these Go foods and not Whoa foods?"

"They keep you running and not asleep and give you lots of energy," answered Kaila Medina, 6, a student at Batchelder School. "If you eat a lot of Whoa foods, you don't want to play."

CATCH comic hero Hearty Heart is often used to teach the children a lesson about food. A visitor from the planet StrongHeart, he only eats Go foods and in one story comes to Earth to figure out why people eat so many Whoa foods.

The program has found success in the form of information retention in other areas of the country. But in Hartford it's too early to tell.

"Its success is being tabulated now," Hamel said.

"We doing surveys with parents and teachers to see if they notice a difference. So far the children are doing better" in terms behavior and academics. **WHL**

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