

Brain and Body

Nutrition, fitness programs at Bellwood Elementary boost health and grades among students

BY JOAN TUPPONCE

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Students at Bellwood Elementary learn about healthy eating and nutrition in their learning garden. *Photo by Kristen Lewis*

Nine-year-old classmates Sebastian Saunders and Brenna Curtis don't write the answers to multiplication questions. They dance over to the correct number on their Twister-like GeoMats. Curtis says it's "good exercise for your legs," while Saunders just likes to groove to music while doing his math. "When you are

moving and active it helps you learn," he says.

Students at Bellwood Elementary are learning more than just their ABCs. They are learning the importance of physical fitness and good nutrition. Classes may not be typical, but they are effective. In February, the Chesterfield school was named the Richmond Sports Backers' Active RVA Outstanding School of the Year for its emphasis on fitness and nutrition.

While this would be an achievement for any school, it's particularly noteworthy for Bellwood Elementary. The school sits just blocks off of Jefferson Davis Highway in a food desert virtually void of grocery stores that sell whole foods, meats and dairy. Many parents have no access to transportation, so families are forced to buy their groceries from stores that carry mainly processed foods and snacks. That type of unhealthy diet, coupled with an inactive lifestyle, can lead to obesity. "We have a significant need here," says Amy Bartilotti, [Communities In Schools](#) site coordinator at the school, pointing to the area's low-income demographic. "Almost 80 percent of our students are eligible for free or reduced lunch."

Bellwood began promoting nutrition three years ago when it received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that enables the school to provide fresh fruit and vegetables to students three days a week. "Our kids have tried things such as star fruit, mangos and papaya," Bartilotti says, adding that many of the students had never eaten these types of foods before.

The school is currently working with [Greater Richmond Fit4Kids](#), a nonprofit organization that helps improve the health and wellness of children. Fit4Kids provides three programs — recess coaching,

wellness integration and learning gardens — to schools. “Bellwood Elementary is the only school that receives all three,” says Fit4Kids wellness integration specialist Nellie Knight.

The programs encourage students to move throughout the day. During class, they play everything from Alphabet Aerobics to Times Table Tag. They pedal stationary bikes while reading and jump around during “brain breaks.” And, the kids love this new way of learning. “After we answer two questions on our work, we can stand and stretch if our brains get tired,” says 9-year-old McKenzie Nuckols. “It helps you when you’re stressed. The more you move around and exercise, the happier you are.”

Teachers are creating their own fitness programs as well. The first fitness initiative, the Bellwood Running Club, operated for more than 10 years and was split last year into two groups: Bellwood Be Well, a program for girls, and Boys on the Go (now Turbo Tortoises). “Bellwood Be Well’s focus is to provide female students opportunities to experience different types of physical activities. For example, girls and their mothers participate in everything from yoga to soccer,” says Bartilotti, who notes that Turbo Tortoises has the same goal for boys. “The boys enjoy spending a morning exercising each week with Rob Nichols and Doug Hesser, two Bellwood staff members.”

Students also learn about fitness from young soldiers stationed at Fort Lee, who exercise with them during physical education breaks. “The soldiers help teach the kids about respect and responsibility,” she says.

During lunch breaks, a recess coach works with students, teaching them how to play. “Our kids don’t really play at home that often,” says Bartilotti. “When you go out at recess, a lot of kids are standing around. They are not outside playing like we used to play.”



Learning to play has multiple benefits, everything from exercise to conflict resolution, she adds. “Recess coaching has dramatically decreased behavior incidences for our students at recess, which has transferred into the classroom. It has been instrumental in teaching students problem-solving skills and conflict resolution.”

Knight, who oversees all aspects of the Fit4Kids program, works with both teachers and students at the school. “My job is to create lessons that are curriculum-based that get students up and moving,” she says. “I also teach lessons encouraging healthy eating and lifestyle habits.”

Saunders, like other students, listens carefully during lessons that focus on nutrition. “I have learned

a little bit more about being healthy like eating dark chocolate is healthier than regular chocolate,” he says. “You should eat a little bit a day.”

The school’s courtyard learning garden is yet another aspect of the school’s wellness initiative. It allows students to plant, grow and harvest plants such as arugula and broccoli. “The kids pick it and wash it so we can eat it for snack,” Bartilotti says. “Edible education is part of that piece. Each grade level will have a lesson such as healthy nutritional snacks.”

While the focus is on students at Bellwood, parents are also encouraged to take part in wellness activities. Brenna Curtis and her mom, for example, are exercising together and planting a garden at home. “We are walking in the afternoon when my mom gets home from work,” Curtis says. Parents also participate in programs with their children and also with other adults. As part of its community outreach, the school offers classes at Bellwood Community Center that teach parents how to create, inexpensive and nutritional meals. “This is truly a community school,” says Bartilotti. “When parents feel the buy-in and commitment from us, it’s a game changer. The more people that are building this supportive community, the better.”

Parent Jessica Booe, who serves as vice president of the Bellwood Parent Teacher Association, is helping other parents learn the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Each day, she and a group of moms walk at least 2 miles around the neighborhood. And because the school’s population is diverse — 40 percent of the school’s students speak Spanish as a first language — language can be a barrier. “There is a language barrier, but in the same aspect, we all know how to walk,” Booe says, adding that parents learn from each other. “We are learning different ways to cook healthy in the [Hispanic] culture, for example. We are guinea pigs, trying new exercises and new recipes.” And, they use what they learn to teach their children. “We all work together,” Booe says.

Bellwood’s holistic approach to education has paid off. Last year, the school was named a Title I Distinguished School for the State of Virginia for exceeding academic expectations — English and math scores are higher than state and county averages. “If you are looking at a holistic approach to education that is data-driven and meets the individual needs of each student, you would be remiss to ignore the wellness component, which includes access to physical activity and nutrition,” Bartilotti says.

The school’s administration, teachers and staff have learned how to “make it work,” she adds. “Income matters, but success can be achieved when you find the right mix. It’s about removing barriers.”