

Colorful Characters Help Kids Be ‘OrganWise’

Conventional wisdom says it’s easier to grow a healthy child than repair an unhealthy adult. As rising obesity rates threaten not only the long-term health of U.S. children but also strain the U.S. health care system, HCSC and its four Plans are working to pave the way for a healthier future through a partnership with the OrganWise Guys (OWG) and university and community organizations.

“The OWG are child-friendly characters — such as Windy the Lungs, Hardy Heart, Pepto the Stomach and Sir Rebrum — that are used to teach kindergarten and elementary school students the importance of adopting healthy living habits,” says Lydia Ashanin, HCSC’s corporate community involvement director, who oversees the OWG Community Collaborative Initiative. “This award-winning program, which helps teachers incorporate health information into their lesson plans, already has shown through pilot study results that it can improve weight, blood pressure and academic scores of elementary-aged children.”

The need to teach better habits is more pressing than ever, she says. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the percentage of overweight children has almost doubled since the 1980s and the percentage of overweight adolescents has risen by nearly 300 percent. In addition, 90 percent of overweight children have at least one avoidable risk factor for heart disease, and 85 percent of children diagnosed with type 2 diabetes are obese.

Partnerships Essential to Progress

HCSC introduced its OWG program into Texas schools in 2006 with the assistance of Prairie View A&M University, and more recently, Texas A&M University. Since then, HCSC has expanded the program to Illinois, Oklahoma and New Mexico through partnerships with the states’ land grant universities, community clinics, tribal communities and other organizations that work with local schools.

“Each state and the students served through the OWG program have unique needs that are best met by a tailored approach our local partners can provide,” says Ashanin. “And the relationships with the universities allow federal matching dollars to be drawn from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to support OWG.”

“The innovative design of the OWG program allows us to not only engage our state’s educators and students in the importance of healthy lifestyle habits but to also mobilize our communities to join in the effort,” says Dr. Peter Murano, Texas A&M University professor and director of the Obesity Research Institute. “OWG is a distinct example of the enormous value that public-private partnerships contribute to tackling the complex public health issue of childhood obesity.”

At the end of 2010, 336 schools and approximately 131,000 students were receiving the OWG curriculum through HCSC and its partners' efforts, says Ashanin. In fact, OWG is one of HCSC's biggest and most successful efforts in support of the community aspect of its wellness-focused mission, she says.

"In Chicago, there are many great programs designed to address childhood obesity," says Anastasia McGee, associate director, Community Nutrition, University of Illinois at Chicago, and director, UIC-Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion. "What is particularly effective about the OWG program is that it is easy for teachers to incorporate into their classes, and the children love the characters. At UIC's Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion, we are looking forward to providing more OWG outreach to schools serving vulnerable children in Chicago over the next five years."

The OWG program has also expanded outside the Chicago area to the rural parts of the state, where the University of Illinois Extension (UIE) is working to incorporate the program into 15 schools in southern Illinois. "This collaboration between the UIE and HCSC is going to pay tremendous dividends in addressing the health needs of rural children in our state," says Robin Orr, UIE director of programming in Urbana.

"The OWG program helps us extend our reach in terms of the number of kids we can serve," says Kari Bachman, program coordinator, New Mexico State University Department of Extension Home Economics. "It is a great collaboration between the extension's nutrition educators and the teachers. The flexibility of the program lets the teachers tailor the curriculum to their particular classroom, and having Spanish language materials available is especially important for us."

Oklahoma's Approach

In Oklahoma, BCBSOK staff initially offered the OWG program to schools through the assistance of community partners, such as Norman Regional Health System, instead of the land grant university systems leveraged in the other three states, says Ashanin. To extend the program's reach, Oklahoma State University (OSU) joined the effort.

"OSU is excited to be a new partner to the HCSC/BCBSOK OWG program," says Debra Garrard-Greene, nutrition education program coordinator, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. "When we learned about the opportunity to leverage USDA dollars for the program, we could immediately see how this partnership would be a win-win effort for the state of Oklahoma."

Building Blocks

The successful results that OWG has achieved in the classroom are being enhanced with an added component, the Foods of the Month Club (FoM). FoM is designed to bring to life the healthy lessons learned in the curriculum by highlighting the nutrient-rich foods that are available in the cafeteria.

Together, OWG and FoM provide an evidence-based program modeled on the Healthier Options for Public Schoolchildren Study, which showed statistically significant improvements in weight and blood pressure measures, as well as standardized test scores.

“Combining these programs allows the nutrition lessons learned in the classroom to be modeled every day through the nutritious meals served in school cafeterias,” says Ashanin. “This is the way to engage children in making good food choices, hopefully for a lifetime.”

The OWG program has also proven successful in complementing local childhood obesity prevention efforts, such as the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children in Illinois and the Marathon Kids program in Texas. “It’s exciting to see that OWG has shown how a community involvement program can succeed as an enterprise endeavor and as an anchor for local community outreach efforts,” says Ashanin.

Policymakers Recognize Program’s Value

The contributions of HCSC’s OWG Community Collaborative Initiative have also been noticed by Texas policymakers, says Charles Stuart, divisional vice president, BCBSTX Government Relations.

“With childhood obesity reaching near epidemic proportions, both BCBSTX and government policymakers are looking for effective ways to address the issue,” says Stuart. “Our partnership with OWG has caught the attention of state officials, who understand the importance of utilizing a school-based program to educate children about the importance of good nutrition and physical activity.”

“We are committed to forming even more community-based collaborations and growth of the OWG program,” says Ashanin. “Our five-year goal is to expand this extraordinarily effective program to 400 additional schools.”