

## **NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

### **Project:**

#### **Four regional "Be Fit!" forums**

### **Type:**

- Physical activity program
- Information/event for parents/guardians
- Policy
- Media campaign/event

### **Setting:**

- School-based
- Community-based

### **Partners:**

- State physical activity council: New Jersey Council on Physical Fitness
- Colleges/universities
- Media outlet(s): The New Jersey Network

### **Goals:**

- To encourage healthy activity, especially physical activity.
- To promote healthy lifestyles.
- To displace unhealthy risk behaviors among preteens, their parents or primary caregivers, community leaders, teachers and other school personnel, and college students preparing to become health and physical education teachers.

### **Description:**

Four "Be Fit!" forums at regional sites drew representatives of 94 schools statewide and included 500 students, parents, teachers, college students, agency representatives, and guests. Teams consisting of a teacher, two students (one male and one female from grades 4-8), and a parent or community representative attended the sessions. Speakers, including former Olympic athletes and officials, emphasized regular physical activity, healthy eating, sportsmanship, motivation, and academic achievement as keys to personal success. Student focus groups were facilitated by trained college students preparing to become health and physical educators. Separate parent and teacher focus groups were led by members of the planning committee. Information obtained in these focus groups is being developed into a summary report that will be shared with the schools and other stakeholders at state conferences and meetings. At each forum, an activity session showcased nontraditional approaches to physical education and activity, such as cooperative games, challenge courses, and climbing walls. The activities were planned and supervised by the college students. Participants who submitted fitness goals and plans were eligible for prizes, including cookbooks, character-education videos, sports equipment, autographed sports memorabilia, and tickets to professional sporting events.



- Before conducting the forum focus groups, 22 college students completed a five-hour training conducted by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training.
- A summary report focuses on the themes presented in the student, teacher, and parent focus groups. Issues include access to school and community facilities (e.g., gyms, fields, weight rooms), class size and scheduling, transportation to school and activity sites, and food choices. The report will lead to further discussion as the state completes its review of the Core Curriculum Content Standards in Health and Physical Education.
- Forum proceedings, personal interviews, and on-site school footage were taped by the New Jersey Network, which assisted in developing public service announcements for its TV stations and web-based messages and links for its website. The network's health and medical correspondent developed a feature on youth fitness in New Jersey. The New Jersey Council on Physical Fitness and Sports plans to use the media messages to kick off a statewide health and fitness campaign, beginning in early 2003. Activities at the Rowan University Forum were taped by the Madison Square Garden Network for inclusion in a documentary on the life of keynote speaker Joetta Clark Diggs.

#### **Successes:**

- A fourth forum was added because of overwhelming demand. Input was gathered from 94 school district representatives.
- Networking and sharing were helpful, particularly in the student focus groups, which provided information on classroom practices, program availability, and resources.
- Participants had an opportunity to see the "new PE" in action. Parents and kids attending the session overwhelmingly supported the kinds of activities presented at the sessions.
- The project brought together numerous state agencies and organizations to focus on youth fitness, and they are discussing future collaborations.
- Joetta Clark Diggs, a former NCAA and Olympic track champion and a capable and enthusiastic spokeswoman, has expressed interest in becoming more involved in promoting youth fitness in New Jersey.

#### **Challenges:**

- It is difficult to organize events of this magnitude in such a short time.
- In spite of the state's mandate for health and physical education, schools in the state have a long way to go in providing quality programs, and most of them want help.
- Different geographic areas experience different obstacles to participation in school and community programs (e.g., residential growth, safety concerns, and lack of transportation, space, coaches, or money). These issues need to be looked at more closely as the project addresses issues of obesity and health.



**Strategies for sustainability:**

- A new “healthy kids” website related to the campaign will allow continued sharing of information with kids, parents, and teachers. Other state agencies, nongovernmental organizations, businesses, and interested citizens will be asked to help convene a similar activity each year. Public-relations staff members will publicize the outcomes of the sessions and promote the campaign. The summary report will be shared with the commissioners of education and health, state legislators, and the governor.

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