

## Modesto Models An Integrated Approach To Community Health, Including Dynamic Afterschool Programs And A Gardening Project For At-Risk Youth Planting “Seeds For The Future”

**J**ohn Ervin III is a credentialed physical education teacher, but as Director of Community and Student Affairs for the Modesto City School District (MCSD), his efforts to prevent obesity and improve community health extend far beyond the school gymnasium. Ervin is part of a growing movement that champions an integrated approach, involving children in programs from infancy to adulthood, with schools as the lead partner.

Ervin believes that “if kids are eating well, getting exercise, and getting enough sleep, they’ll also do better in school,” a belief supported by a growing body of research.

Over a 10-year period Ervin has helped to spearhead the implementation of his school district’s wellness policy, turning MCSD—serving 31,000 students—into a model of increased physical activity, nutrition education, and nutritional services. Afterschool programs have been critical to its success.

When Ervin was hired in 1998, initially as afterschool

coordinator, only two sites offered afterschool programs; today 18 sites serve more than 1,800 students, using the SPARK curriculum. SPARK (Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids) is a nationally recognized program developed by educators at San Diego State University for Pre-K through 12th grade students. Combining physical activity with lessons in healthy living, SPARK engages children in moderate to vigorous activity, fitness, and sports, while fostering an enjoyment of physical activity aimed at building lifelong healthy habits both in and out of school.

“Every afterschool staff member is trained in the curriculum,” says Ervin. “We want to reinforce that physical activity is as important as academics.”

Resources, training, and support for the SPARK curriculum and for a number of other Modesto school wellness efforts came from the Stanislaus County Health Services Agency (HSA) Public Health Division and its Nutrition Network; and from the West Modesto King Kennedy Neighborhood Collaborative



*Student gardeners at “Seeds for the Future” donate their harvest to local food banks.*

(WMKKNC), a partner in the Healthy Eating Active Living—Community Health Initiative (HEAL-CHI), a program funded by Kaiser Permanente to address childhood obesity. Together these partners have actively engaged the local community around policy and advocacy efforts aimed at improving physical activity and food environments.

How is Modesto making physical activity appealing to children? Among other strategies: Through an innovative joint use agreement with a local golf course, hundreds of elementary school students participate in First Tee Golf lessons, while junior high students participate in a 25-hour soccer training session. Many of the afterschool

## Modesto's Healthy Afterschool Programs (Continued)

programs feature Wii Systems that entertain youngsters while getting them up and moving; the systems are funded through a one-time budget allocation for afterschool programs. In addition, as part of an incentives program, students enjoy field trips to an arts center and a bowling alley.

Some of MCSD's most successful school sites had previously been seen as "not possible." But, says the infectiously optimistic Ervin, "It's all in the power of persuasion!" He made it a point to work collaboratively with MCSD staff, students, and their parents to plan the programs and design the strategies for implementation. He also forged non-traditional partnerships, for example, between MCSD's Nutritional Services Director and the West Modesto King Kennedy Neighborhood Collaborative, helping to expedite the implementation of new federal and state government nutrition standards, improved menu options, and expanded universal breakfast.

"We knew how important the new standards were and didn't want to wait for the government-mandated deadlines to implement them," says Ervin. "The neighborhood collaborative helped us to get community buy-in and gather up the research and examples from other school districts, so that by the time we put the proposal

in front of the administration, all they had to do was sign it. We made their work easier and, in the end, MCSD implemented the changes a full year ahead of schedule."

Along with community mobilization, policy advocacy, and systems change within organizations, Ervin stresses the importance of one-on-one mentoring, and sees himself as a role model for students.

Outside of his work for MCSD, Ervin founded Project Uplift, a community-based and afterschool mentoring program for at-risk youth—including African American, Latino, Cambodian, and white youth ages 9 to 18—promoting education and exposure to positive activities. Project Uplift currently has 35 active members, 20 of whom are being trained to grow their own produce on one acre of a community garden operated by Heifer International, an organization that is also helping them to become Certified Producers. In summer 2009 three more acres were added to the garden, and a week-long summer science academy brought in a science teacher to help the young farmers study soils and plant growth, to better understand the science of farming.

Calling themselves "Seeds for the Future," the student gardeners donated their first harvest to local food banks, but ultimately

they plan to sell their produce at farmers markets in West Modesto and Ceres. Proceeds will support college scholarships for graduating members.

"Adults can tell kids that something is important, but really they need to see it and do it for themselves," says Ervin. And the health impacts are clear. "Besides increasing their access to fresh fruits and vegetables, working out on the farm does wonders. Four of our youth in Project UPLIFT have lost at least 10 pounds each, and two more have lost at least five pounds."

The community garden program grew out of the Healthy Eating Active Living initiative, and in fall 2009 a new student club was formed—taking that same name, HEAL (Healthy Eating Active Living)—in order to encourage healthy behaviors and attitudes through peer-to-peer education.

In recognition of his contributions to community health in Modesto, Ervin received the 2009 CCROPP Cultivator Award from the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program.

*The Healthy Eating Active Living—Community Health Initiative (HEAL-CHI), an initiative of Kaiser Permanente, funds the partnership among the West Modesto King Kennedy Neighborhood Collaborative*

## Modesto's Healthy Afterschool Programs (*Continued*)

*(WMKKNC), Stanislaus County Health Services Agency, and Modesto City School District (MCSD) to address childhood obesity through multi-pronged strategies that include community engagement and policy and system changes.*

*The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) is the Central California Public Health Partnership's initiative to create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed under the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno. CCROPP is funded by The California Endowment.*

### **For more information:**

Stanislaus County Health Services Agency–Public Health Division: [www.hsahealth.org](http://www.hsahealth.org)

Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program: [www.ccropp.org](http://www.ccropp.org), (559) 228-2140

Phoebe Leung, Assistant Director, Public Information Officer, Stanislaus County Health Services Agency, (209) 558-7116, [pleung@schsa.org](mailto:pleung@schsa.org)

John Ervin III, Director of Community and Student Affairs for the Modesto City School District, (209) 576-4178, [Ervin.J@monet.k12.ca.us](mailto:Ervin.J@monet.k12.ca.us)

SPARK Programs: [www.sparkpe.org](http://www.sparkpe.org)