

Schools focus on fitness and nutrition this spring

by Dr. Debra Bowers, Superintendent

Susan Lindgren sixth grade student Alexander Gold loves Dance, Dance, Revolution (DDR). He loves it so much that he'll gladly stay after school with 15 other classmates every Tuesday for this hour-long aerobic workout with the electronic DDR game and dance pad.

His mother, Anita Gold says it gives him more energy. "The more he does, the more he wants to do."

DDR is one of six afterschool activities offered at Susan Lindgren this spring as part of a coordinated effort to engage children in physical activity and decrease the time they spend in front of a television, computer screen or video game.

Susan Lindgren piloted the afterschool program this winter. Tuition is just \$5 for classes such as DDR, Beading Club, Kickball and running/walking clubs designed not only to foster a love of exercise, but to also provide healthy alternatives to screen time. Program partners include Parks & Recreation, Community Education, Ridgedale YMCA, Park Nicollet Health Services and Search Institute. This winter, 66 kids signed up for the afterschool fun. Eighty-nine students are enrolled in spring activities, thanks in part to the addition of an activity bus to take students home.

Encouraging healthy eating habits and learning what good nutrition is all about is also part of the initiative, largely funded by General Mills and supplemented by a Hennepin County Physical Activity and Nutrition grant.

Students in grades four through six and their families are invited to a Raising Healthy Kids spaghetti dinner and panel discussion from 6-9 p.m., Tuesday, May 2 at the St. Louis Park Senior High, 6425 West 33rd Street. Dinner is served from 6-7 p.m. in the cafeteria with a presentation and panel discussion following from 7-9 p.m. in the auditorium. Funds for this free event are provided by the General Mills grant.

Panel participants Jamie Stang, PhD, MPH, RD, from the University of Minnesota, Karen Rowehl, RD, Park Nicollet Health Services, Kathy Milbrath, Director of School Nutrition and Karen Atkinson, Children First coordinator will share their expertise in child and adolescent health and nutrition. Rowehl's philosophy is that parents' responsibility is to provide children with nutritious meals and children's responsibility is to choose what they eat and how much. We hope parents and children learn that normal eating is flexible, varied, enjoyable and balanced.

Susan Lindgren staff are teaching and modeling good nutrition by serving fresh fruit and healthy General Mills snack products at conferences. Principal Ann Sullivan tells me

she's seeing a difference in what kids are bringing for snack. Teachers and parents organizing school parties are choosing to serve fresh fruit instead of cake.

Anita Gold says she has always insisted her son bring a healthy snack, but the emphasis the school is putting on good nutrition "makes it easier for Alexander to live with my decisions."

The idea that all students can improve their fitness levels regardless of their skills and abilities is being reinforced through the Presidential Award for Lifetime Activity (PALA) program that is part of the physical education curriculum for students in grades four through six at Cedar Manor, PSI and Susan Lindgren. PALA participants keep fitness logs of their activities and receive awards and certificates based on participation.

"The focus is to get kids moving," said Nate Pollack, Susan Lindgren physical education teacher. "It helps kids achieve success who might not do so with the traditional Presidential Fitness Awards."

We surveyed students and their parents about their fitness, nutrition and screen-time habits last fall. We will conduct an assessment this spring, as well, so that we may begin to track changes and see what a difference concentrating on nutrition and fitness can make.