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University collaborates with local school to promote value of fitness

Jim Stewart
Furman University

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University collaborates with local school to promote value of fitness

Fuller Normal Advanced Technology Charter School in Greenville is intent upon reversing the national trend toward obesity in American's youth — while at the same time boosting academic achievement.

And Furman faculty and students are key contributors to the cause.

This academic year, Fuller Normal introduced a program that requires the school's approximately 250 students to engage in 45 minutes of directed physical activity per day — not including recess.

By comparison, most Greenville County elementary students take part in a physical education class for 45 minutes one day a week.

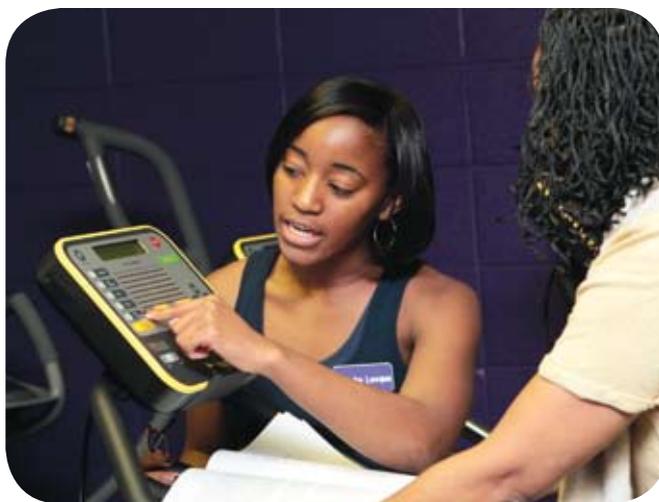
Studies indicate that students who are fit are better behaved, feel better and perform more effectively both in the classroom and on standardized tests. Given this data, the powers that be at Fuller Normal decided to establish the daily wellness program at the school, which serves students from kindergarten to eighth grade and draws from lower-income areas in Greenville.

Even though it has no gymnasium, the school sectioned off an area of its cafeteria to create a fitness center complete with exercise bikes, elliptical machines and weight stations. Two full-time physical education teachers work with all students each day. In addition, the school has partnered with Morrison's, the food service provider for Greenville's Bon Secours St. Francis Hospital, to revamp its dietary program and provide healthy meals that surpass USDA requirements.

Private donations helped to fund the fitness center, a huge advantage given the budget constraints faced by South Carolina

public schools. And since the center opened in the fall, Fuller Normal students have enthusiastically embraced the program while encouraging their parents to hop on the bandwagon.

After the regular school day ends, the facility remains open into the evening for use by teachers and parents. Furman students



and recent alumni staff the center, where they are available to assist clients or to tutor Fuller Normal students so parents can exercise.

The program is already paying benefits. Students seem to be maintaining higher energy levels throughout the day while learning such intangibles as sportsmanship (they often engage in friendly fitness competitions) and respect for others and for the equipment itself.

As a result, Fuller Normal may one day serve as a model for other schools to emulate.

All this is the brainchild of Greenville businessman William Brown, chair of the school's board. Brown and his fellow directors joined with principal Brenda Humbert to

provide the impetus for the program. They recruited Julian Reed, associate professor of health and exercise science at Furman, to help implement the plan.

"I'm unaware of any program with this much across-the-board buy-in or this kind of holistic approach that extends to the entire school community," says Reed, who has studied childhood obesity and written a book on integrating movement into the classroom environment. He helped hire the school's physical education instructors, assisted in purchasing the exercise equipment, and recruited Furman students and alumni to work at the facility.

Reed visits the school frequently and points out that Fuller Normal will serve as a research laboratory through which he and current undergraduates can compare information on academic progress, absenteeism, disciplinary problems and health-room visits with data from other schools that do not offer daily physical education instruction.

He says that the Fuller Normal program can also be viewed as preventive medicine. "Here we have an opportunity to intervene at an early age, to teach and model the value and importance of exercise," he says. "By doing so, we can prevent problems from occurring later.

"The children help to pass the lesson along by influencing their parents to take advantage of the fitness center. By paying a little now, we believe we'll be able to avoid paying a lot more later."

— JIM STEWART

Visit <http://eweb.furman.edu/dept/hes/jreed.htm> to learn more about Julian Reed's work on fitness and movement. Photo by Jeremy Fleming.