

## Skimming the Fat: The CATCH Initiative

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With reports from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regarding the prevalence of and danger associated with obesity in America, a “call to action” was issued to all communities nationwide to help address this health problem. In a world where fast food and soft drinks are a common meal and Internet surfing or computer games replace exercise, children today face serious health consequences.

The Paso del Norte Health Foundation recognized early that obesity was a problem in its community. So when the call to action was issued, Paso del Norte felt a sense of pride that it had been addressing this problem within the community since 1997. A task force of educators, community organizations, and foundation representatives was created to reduce the risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and Type II diabetes among school-aged children within the region. After reviewing several school health programs, the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) was selected to provide a comprehensive prevention plan to serve as a means by which schools could educate and encourage students to engage in more vigorous physical education activities, eat nutritious meals, increase their knowledge on healthful lifestyles, and involve their families in the effort to lead healthier lives.

The foundation has committed \$4.2 million over seven years to the CATCH initiative to assist in improving the health among children due to poor nutrition habits and lack of exercise. The program was funded both in west Texas and southern New Mexico. What initially began as an 18-school pilot test of the CATCH program in the Paso del Norte region has grown to 126 elementary schools in 12 public school districts, as well as private, charter, and several parochial schools, reaching an estimated 73,000 children and their families. A plan is in place to incorporate CATCH into every elementary school in El Paso, Texas, by the year 2007.

The success of the CATCH program is directly related to

the unique qualities it offers students. It provides fun, hands-on training in healthier eating, physical activity, and tobacco avoidance for elementary students. These healthy behaviors and attitudes are reinforced through a coordinated approach to health education involving classroom teachers, physical education teachers, food service personnel, and the family. The activities include preparing healthy snacks, setting personal fitness goals, developing behavior contracts, and over 300 fitness-based physical education activities.

Because of the growing pressure to meet state-mandated curriculum guidelines (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS), many of these health concerns are pushed aside or eliminated from the schools and/or classrooms. To assist with these pressures, the CATCH specialists have developed a lesson-planning tool that helps teachers in connecting the CATCH curriculum with the TEKS for health and physical education. The CATCH curriculum can also be adapted to lessons in language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science.

The 77<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature has recently emphasized efforts to combat poor health habits among children through the passage of Senate Bill 19, which requires elementary students in grades kindergarten through six to participate in daily physical activity, as authorized by the State Board of Education. “Senate Bill 19 has been a welcome addition in our fight to overcome obesity among our children,” exclaimed Ann G. Pauli, president and CEO of the Paso del Norte Health Foundation. “I’m very proud of the work developed within this initiative. It’s impressive to see how a relatively small amount of funding in our community can bring a major impact statewide.”

The CATCH initiative was established prior to Senate Bill 19 and has had great success. As a result, visitors from other parts of the country have toured El Paso regional CATCH schools to learn first-hand how to implement a program such as CATCH in their educational systems.

## DOES IT REALLY WORK?

Studies have shown that the number of obese children and adolescents nationwide has doubled in the past 30 years. In El Paso, 20 percent of boys and 16 percent of girls are obese. CATCH has been accepted as a strong program to address the issues of sedentary lifestyles and poor eating habits of the region's elementary school students. To evaluate the program, the foundation contracted with Dr. Karen J. Coleman of the Psychology Department at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Dr. Coleman found that there was an increase in the time spent in physical education, with moderate to vigorous physical activity over one year jumping from 30 percent to 52 percent for students in the CATCH program. Rates of aerobic fitness also increased for El Paso girls from 53 percent to 65 percent. These rates have not hit the national goal of 70 percent, but progress has been made. Current rates of obesity in the region are showing a decline, as compared to national figures.

The program has made positive changes in the schools by including wellness days and health fairs for parental involvement. The cafeterias have implemented sample taste testing of new menu items, cafeteria workers are making healthy snacks for the TEKS testing days, and parents are invited to join their children during lunch for a healthy meal.

The physical education teachers have been the leaders in the implementation of the program. By utilizing a variety of techniques, children are exercising and having fun at the same time. Today, classes on the CATCH curriculum at the University of Texas at El Paso are offered to physical education and elementary school teachers. Also, monthly parent education classes instructed by a CATCH program specialist are available at several of the CATCH schools. "It's important to target not only students, but their families," says Pauli. "Everyone needs to take part in overcoming obesity. It's a community problem."

## PASO DEL NORTE HEALTH FOUNDATION

The mission of the Paso del Norte Health Foundation is to impact long-term changes in the health of the region. Since the development of the CATCH program, steady progress has been made to keep the children of the region healthy, but there is still much work to do. The foundation looks to continue evaluating the program and heighten awareness of the importance of healthy children. Children are our future, and we need to keep them healthy. The CATCH program can be the first step in the right direction, now and into the future.

## SNAPSHOT OF THE CATCH INITIATIVE

**Funding:** \$4.2 million

**Term:** 7 years

**Mission:** The mission of the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) is to support elementary schools in their effort to develop children's lifetime health habits for better nutrition, increased physical activity, and tobacco avoidance.

**Vision:** To promote health and reduce chronic diseases associated with dietary excess and imbalances, sedentary lifestyle, and tobacco use through the elementary school curriculum and family involvement.

**Purpose:** The purpose of the Paso del Norte CATCH initiative is to positively impact the health of elementary-aged children and their families in El Paso and Hudspeth counties in Texas, and Doña Ana and Otero counties in New Mexico. The 2000 – 2001 CATCH Action Plan reflects the program's extension from a four-year to a seven-year initiative and name change from Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health to Coordinated Approach to Child Health. CATCH is no longer a trial, and the new name more accurately represents current program practices.

The extension of this initiative provides a singular opportunity to institutionalize a CATCH-based, standardized health promotion curriculum in elementary schools of the region. The program curriculum has been implemented in 126 elementary schools and reaches approximately 73,000 students and their families. The program's training for teachers and students' activities connect to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for health and physical education. In addition, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills objectives are supported by the CATCH curriculum.

Additional staff members (curriculum specialist, physical education specialist, nutrition specialist, and program secretary) have significantly increased the technical assistance and support already offered to all CATCH schools. The program specialist increases the impact on school district and campus-level policies and procedures in the program component areas of physical education, health education, nutrition, and family involvement.

For more information on the CATCH initiative, contact Juanita Galaviz, project manager, 915.544.7636, [jgalaviz@pdnhf.org](mailto:jgalaviz@pdnhf.org), or visit [www.pdnhf.org](http://www.pdnhf.org).

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