

For more information contact:

Denise Holston at (225) 578-4573

dholston@agctr.lsu.edu

Richard Williams at (225) 295-2296

Richard.Williams@bcbsla.com

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‘Smart Bodies’ Program Spreading Across Louisiana

Children across Louisiana will learn to be smart about their bodies again this year as a unique nutrition, health and fitness educational program comes to schools across the state.

"Smart Bodies," as the program is known, is an interactive educational program designed to help prevent childhood obesity through classroom activities that teach children about healthy eating habits and physical exercise.

Coordinated by the LSU AgCenter and sponsored by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation, the program will be offered to nearly 100 elementary schools in at least 34 parishes of the state this year.

The program has been offered since 2005, and research shows it's making a difference for the youngsters who have participated.

"So far, we've found knowledge about fruits and vegetables, as well as willingness to consume fruits and vegetables, improved among students who participated in the program," said Denise Holston, who coordinates the statewide educational program for the LSU AgCenter.

"We also studied the activity levels of students, and we found students registered higher activity counts when they were involved in the Take 10! part of the Smart Bodies program than when they were involved in recess, physical education, lunch or after school activities," she added.

Take 10! is one aspect of the three-pronged approach that's designed to help students in kindergarten through the 5th grade learn the importance of good nutrition and exercise in a manner they can easily understand. It involves a series of classroom-based, grade-specific educational tools that encourage short bouts of physical activity integrated with academic lessons.

The other components of the program are the Louisiana Body Walk and the OrganWise

Guys.

The Body Walk is a 35-foot-by-45-foot walk-through exhibit representing the human body. Designed to be an at-school field trip, the interactive Body Walk and its 10 learning stations are designed to let students explore models of various organs such as the stomach, heart, lungs and brain and to learn about the effects of different foods on each organ.

The OrganWise Guys are a group of fun characters who help young children understand physiology and healthy behaviors. These characters – Hardy Heart, Madame

Muscle, Windy the Lungs, Peri Stolic the Intestines, Sir Rebrum the Brain, Peter Pancreas, Pepto the Stomach, the Kidney Brothers, Luigi Liver and Calci M. Bone – are used throughout the Body Walk, as well as in the program's classroom curriculum.

"During the 2005-06 school year, nearly 35,000 children participated in the program," Holston said. "In addition, 18 East Baton Rouge Parish elementary schools were part of the formal research project, which evaluated the effectiveness of the program by having nine of them participate in Smart Bodies and using the other nine as a control group."

The formal research showed students participating in Smart Bodies were twice as willing to taste fruits and vegetables. It also showed the participants increased their knowledge of physical activity and were more likely to be physically active during their participation in the Take 10! activities.

In fact, those students were 35 percent more active during a Take 10! activity than during physical education classes at school, 22 percent more active during such activities than during recess, 51 percent more active than during lunch and 47 percent more active than after school.

"The whole idea behind this program is to combat childhood obesity and the health problems it can lead to later in life," said Richard Williams, senior vice president of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana. "By teaching children about making healthy choices early in life, we feel Smart Bodies can reduce or eliminate some of the devastating problems that stem from inactivity and improper nutrition."

Smart Bodies represents a partnership between the state's largest health insurer company and the LSU AgCenter – the statewide outreach arm of the LSU System.

The program was funded in large part by a five-year grant of \$1.8 million from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation. That grant funds the participation of 50 schools each year, and the LSU AgCenter seeks other funds to cover the remaining schools.

"We think the Smart Bodies program is proving to be well worth the investment," said Dr. Paul Coreil, vice chancellor of the LSU AgCenter. "Statistics show a third of Louisiana's school children are obese, so something has to be done. We think Smart Bodies is a great step toward fighting childhood obesity and helping our younger generation grow up to lead healthier lives."

School officials who have been associated with the program also agree.

"Smart Bodies fits well into St. Charles Parish Public Schools' newly developed wellness policy that requires schools to provide and promote nutrition education," said Cynthia Ruffin, director of Child Nutrition Programs for St. Charles Parish Public Schools.

"Nutrition education has always been included in portions of our students' curriculum, but Smart Bodies is a more-comprehensive and creative way to teach students about the importance of eating right and exercising.

Ruffin said the program's trend toward being more "hands on" is the key to getting the attention of students and helping them to grasp all the concepts involved in adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Likewise, Teri Noel, principal of Orly Magnet School in LaPlace, said the Body Walk and other portions of the program were helping.

"This event was an awesome experience for my students," Noel wrote about the program. "K-5 students thoroughly enjoyed the exhibit, and teachers were pleased with the information presented. Thanks for the opportunity."

At least 93 elementary schools in 34 parishes across Louisiana have signed on to implement the Smart Bodies program during the 2006-07 school year. Those parishes include Acadia, Ascension, Bienville, Bossier, Caddo, Calcasieu, Caldwell, Cameron, Claiborne, Concordia, DeSoto, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Evangeline, Grant, Iberia, Jackson, Jefferson, Lafayette, Lafourche, Livingston, Morehouse, Orleans, Ouachita, Rapides, Sabine, St. Charles, St. John, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Vermilion, Webster and Winn.

To learn more about Smart Bodies or the wealth of programs offered by the LSU AgCenter, visit www.lsuagcenter.com <<http://www.lsuagcenter.com>> . Or visit www.smartbodies.org <<http://www.smartbodies.org>> to learn more about the program, as well as its sponsors.

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Contact: Denise Holston at (225) 578-4573 or dholston@agcenter.lsu.edu

Writer: Tom Merrill at (225) 578-2263 or tmerrill@agcenter.lsu.edu