



Get-Fit Program in Perth Amboy, N.J., High School Puts Salsa Dancing on After-School Menu

Developing a healthy eating and physical activity program to help overweight Perth Amboy High School students

SUMMARY

The non-sectarian [Jewish Renaissance Foundation](#) created an after-school program in 2005 for high-school students in Perth Amboy, N.J., to engage them in healthy eating habits and regular physical activity.

The project was part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) *New Jersey Health Initiatives* national program (for more information see [Program Results](#)), a statewide grantmaking program created to improve health care for New Jersey residents through innovative, community-based health services.

Key Results

- In early 2005, 25 female students participated for eight weeks in the Teen Fit Club at Perth Amboy High School. Activities included salsa dancing, gymnastics and lessons on healthy lifestyles. The club continued to meet throughout the following school year.

Funding

RWJF provided \$95,494 for this project.

THE PROBLEM

Obesity is the most significant public health issue in Perth Amboy, N.J., according to a 2001 *Community Health Needs Assessment* report produced by the Middlesex County Public Health Department. Almost half of the city's population—twice the national average—is overweight.

Unhealthy dietary patterns are one reason, but so is physical inactivity. One local study indicates that only 14 percent of residents exercise at least 30 minutes daily, with

African-American and Hispanic populations exercising the least. A 1999 New Jersey Department of Education survey of the state's poorest school districts found that:

- Approximately 15 percent of Perth Amboy High School students (95 percent of whom are Hispanic) did not attend daily gym class due to scheduling.
- About 20 percent of students were failing gym due to lack of participation.

The Jewish Renaissance Foundation supports health care initiatives in Middlesex County, N.J., including two in Perth Amboy that often overlap and draw from one another in resources:

- The [School-Based Youth Services Program](#), a community and government partnership funded by the New Jersey Health and Human Services Department to provide Perth Amboy High School students and their families with counseling, health education and referrals for health care.
- The [Community Partnership for Healthy Adolescents](#), a larger grant initiative funded by the state that engages various local groups in the development of programs aimed at promoting healthy eating and physical activity, and reducing injury and violence among teens. The partnership has helped create projects at Perth Amboy High School, such as a conflict mediation program and student-teacher walking races in which teams used pedometers to chart their daily steps, individually and collectively, on classroom maps to see who "walked" the farthest across America.

According to the director of the School-Based Youth Services Program, who also directed the New Jersey Health Initiatives project, new nutrition and exercise programs are needed so the local health care system does not become overwhelmed by patients with obesity-related health conditions.

CONTEXT

RWJF is committed to tackling one of today's most pressing threats to the health of children and families—childhood obesity. The goal is to help halt the rise in childhood obesity rates by promoting healthy eating and physical activity in schools and communities throughout the nation. RWJF places special emphasis on reaching children at greatest risk: African-American, Hispanic, Native American and Asian/Pacific Islander children living in low-income communities.

RWJF has a four-pronged approach to halting the increase in childhood obesity:

- Building the evidence regarding what works to promote healthy eating and increase physical activity among kids.
- Testing innovative approaches in order to spread promising models.
- Educating leaders and investing in advocacy strategies.

- Working on ways to help health care providers screen and counsel to prevent and manage childhood obesity.

New Jersey Health Initiatives is a statewide grantmaking program of RWJF. It supports innovative approaches to resolve health and health care needs in New Jersey. RWJF supports projects that address any of its [goal areas](#) are supported through competitive grants awarded annually. Projects focus on health services delivery, improvement in health and the expansion of leadership expertise through grantmaking.

THE PROJECT

The initial goal of this project was to develop a Lean Teen weight-reduction program that focused on the needs, challenges and concerns of Perth Amboy High School students, and then to pilot the new program, in the form of a club, with 25 students.

The project team, which included members of the Youth Advisory and the executive boards of the Community Partnership for Healthy Adolescents as well as the high-school's nursing director, athletic director and others, undertook several research and planning activities:

- The Youth Advisory Board, which consisted of about a dozen students at Perth Amboy High School, wrote a survey regarding physical activity and healthy eating and disseminated it with the help of other team members during morning homeroom classes. About 800 out of 2,200 students completed the survey. Their responses showed that:
 - Most boys worried little about their weight.
 - Girls were more preoccupied with their weight, and had tried various weight-reduction interventions, including fad diets and diet pills.
 - Female students expressed reluctance to join a co-ed club, due to self-consciousness about physical appearance.
- Two public health interns from [Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy](#) held two focus groups of 24 students, measuring their knowledge, attitudes and skills regarding physical activity, nutrition and dieting. They found that:
 - Students had a limited amount of education about healthy eating—about 90 minutes over the course of four years.
 - Teens had limited opportunities to make healthy eating choices in school and out, whether the temptation came from unhealthy vending-machine snacks or fast-food from the dozens of franchises in the four-square-mile city.

- Researcher Shirley Smoyak, MS, MPhil, PhD, also of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, conducted a search for best practices in the field of healthy eating and physical activity but found:
 - Specific weight-loss interventions geared at high-school students were almost non-existent.
 - There was no scientific data to support any one comprehensive approach.

Based on the research findings, the project team designed a club just for girls, changing the focus from weight reduction to healthy eating habits and physical activity because of concerns about the possibility of "competitive weight loss" (and possibly even anorexia).

The premise was that by adopting healthy habits the girls would stabilize at their appropriate weight. To recruit members and encourage community support, the team advertised the club through a local television channel, school announcements and flyers.

RESULTS

The project director reported the following result:

- **In early 2005, 25 female students participated for eight weeks in the Teen Fit Club at Perth Amboy High School.** The Jewish Renaissance Foundation Medical Center, a federally qualified health care center serving the medically needy in Perth Amboy, offered the girls free physicals to make sure they had no health problems that would impede participation. For two months, the girls met three times a week for an hour and a half after school to:
 - Learn how to adopt healthier eating habits. The project team based many of the lesson plans on the [California Project LEAN](#) program—Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition. It is a joint program of the California Department of Health Services and the Public Health Institute focusing on youth empowerment, policy and environmental change strategies and community-based solutions. Lesson plans included "Facts of Life: Healthy Eating Basics" and "Reading the Fine Print: The Food Label."
 - Engage in regular physical activity (salsa dancing, gymnastics, walking, etc.).

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Expect limited scientific data to support any one model for helping high-school students lose weight.** The project team had to craft its own approach by building upon a limited collection of best practices. The project was delayed by three months because the search for existing programs took longer than expected. By the time the researcher was ready to present her findings to the full team, it was late summer, and many members were away on vacation. (Project Director)

2. **Prepare for challenges when scheduling after-school activities.** Finding a time for students and outside instructors (such as the salsa teacher) to meet was difficult to coordinate. (Project Director)
3. **Focus the club on younger high school students.** Seventy percent of the participants were 13 to 15 years old. Although older students wanted to participate, many were unable due to after-school work and responsibilities. Younger students seemed to have less responsibilities and more time to meet. (Project Director)
4. **Involve students in program development and marketing.** Students on the team's Youth Advisory Board played a crucial role in crafting and marketing the club. For example, they rejected its original title (Lean Teen program) for the more appealing Teen Fit Club. (Project Director)

AFTERWARD

The Teen Fit Club met throughout the 2005–06 school year and became co-ed, transforming itself into more of a social club focused on healthy lifestyles, with 20 participants. Some group activities included:

- Going to see *Super Size Me*, a movie exploring how the fast food industry encourages poor nutrition for its own profit.
- Inviting parents to exercise with members at a family fitness night.

The Board of Education and the School-Based Youth Services Program funded the club.

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