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Feature Article

By Amanda S.F. Hartle

Web-based tool tracks student statistics

Sitting at desks, reading books and practicing multiplication tables in classrooms around the nation, nearly half of all children are overweight or obese.

The problem is obvious.

For many, there are simply too many video games and too little outdoor play, which coupled with too many sweets and too little fruits and vegetables add up to a deadly combination that leads to increased risk for diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and other preventable health conditions.

The solution is not always simple, but a handful of Pennsylvania companies are working to shape healthier adolescents and arm them with knowledge to make wholesome decisions.

Across Pennsylvania, nearly 800,000 students in hundreds of schools are utilizing the free Web-based Health eTools for Schools.

The secure Web portal combines the efforts of district administrators, physical education instructors, food service employees and school nurses, and connects them directly to parents for a multi-pronged and unilateral attack on childhood obesity, says Janice Seigle, strategic corporate initiatives director at Highmark Inc. based in Pittsburgh.

"The Highmark Foundation recognizes that schools are where children eat up to two meals a day and have regular opportunities for physical activity and education," she says. "But many schools lack resources."

eTools are cost-efficient for participating districts due to funding provided through 2013 by Highmark Inc., Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania and Independence Blue Cross, and are an easily accessible and user-friendly resource for parents as well as educational partners, Seigle says.

"It facilitates school personnel efforts to work in partnership with parents and students to address the growing public health epidemic of childhood obesity," she says. "The portal provides schools with many resources including lesson plans, curricula to facilitate health education sessions and suggestions for implementing wellness policy initiatives... Schools that have a strong commitment to addressing student wellness through a coordinated health approach benefit greatly from using Health eTools for Schools."

Designed by Lancaster-based InnerLink, eTools ensures administrators' continued revenue relates to state and federal wellness policy compliance, provides training and support for staff and saves time and data storage by eliminating duplicate student health information entry while storing information in a secure, off-site repository.

For teachers, it provides curriculum and lesson plans that include interactive programs conveying the importance of healthy food choices and exercises. For food service employees, it offers information to aid in ensuring state nutritional standards are met with each product.

Many districts, like Pittsburgh Public Schools, The School District of Philadelphia and Brandywine Heights Area SD, are employing a vital sector of the program in their health service suites by placing up-to-date technology that could result in healthier students into the hands of nursing staffs.

Before Health eTools, documenting children's state-mandated health screenings required time-consuming paperwork that repeated year after year. But in 2005, Brandywine Heights Middle School Nurse Dawn Schwenk began to digitally preserve important growth markers for the more than 600 students in her building.

"Everything is nice and neat," she says. "You don't have to worry about anyone's unreadable handwriting. It prints everything you need to send to parents after screenings."

For the first time, Schwenk will use a handheld PDA this year to enter data like childrens' height and weight, which determine their Body Mass Index. Then with a simple USB connection and sync, each student's data will be loaded onto her computer where it can continue to grow with each child through graduation.

Additionally, eTools have the capacity to document daily logs that detail every visit to the nurse's office, chronic health conditions, daily medication needs, parent contacts and referrals in a uniform format for 28,000 students overseen by 36 school nurses in Pittsburgh Public Schools, says Janet Yuhasz, coordinator of student wellness in the urban district.

"Instead of a fragmented, haphazard method of student health record keeping, this technology program contains all the elements of data documentation that portray a typical work day for a school nurse," Yuhasz says.

Still some without PDAs, who rely on manual entry, take issue with eTools, says Schwenk.

“Data entry takes time. But whatever program you have, you’ll have to do it at least once. It’s just so much nicer. (With eTools), I can click, click and I have what I want. It’s the best program I have used that aligns with state forms and mandates.”

And that was the intention of eTools designers at InnerLink, who partnered with Highmark Inc. to create the tool, and administers and maintains the portal.

“Health eTools functions as a gateway; a one-stop shop for validated curriculum and best practices that can enable educators, administrators, nurses, parents and students to adopt a healthy lifestyle,” says Martha L. Harris, InnerLink’s executive vice president, who coordinated eTools.

“The program saves people time in searching the Web by posting information within the portal and providing online collaboration tools where people can share ideas within their school district or regions.” Several improvements to the product are forthcoming, Harris says.

Planned additions include an online system for document creation, storage for teachers to create lesson plans and nurses to draft health plans using materials posted on eTools and a confidential online student assistance application, which will enable assistance teams to prepare needed documentation for students’ case management, if they are referred for assistance.

Keeping classified documents like those confidential also could be a concern for many, but the information gathered is protected by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), Seigle says.

“Student data is never shared, only aggregate;” she says, “de-identified data is available for the purposes of assessing the impact of the portal and improving its capabilities.”

These safeguards, coupled with life-changing information, inspired the insurance partners to underwrite costs for member school districts until this year’s freshman class graduates. And although no new school districts can sign up for the program, Harris believes that those utilizing the tools have taken a strong pledge to create a healthy environment for students.

“The funds committed by the Highmark Foundation to make eTools accessible are sizable, but there is a limit and we have reached it...The Highmark Foundation is working with InnerLink, the state departments of health and education, as well as other funders to determine how costs to schools can be mitigated, so that eTools remains accessible and affordable for schools,” after 2013.

Until space and funding issues are resolved, interested schools can encourage the state departments of health and education to work with eTools partners, so the resource is available to all schools who need it, Seigle says.

Member schools, who are utilizing the tools, have taken a strong pledge to create a healthy environment for students.

“Health eTools can help schools become a source where positive health behaviors can be learned, practiced and adopted for a lifetime...,” she says, “(and in the end) that’s what school should be about.”

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