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Wellness is topic for everyone at school

By Jennifer K Mahal
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LEMON GROVE – It was a statistic on fear that helped Golden Avenue School Principal Rick Oser realize the need for a comprehensive wellness program at his Lemon Grove elementary school.

Oser was already in talks about student health with Dr. Ellen Beck, director of the University of California San Diego Student-Run Free Clinic Project, when the state-sponsored California Healthy Kid Survey revealed that 48 percent of fifth-graders did not feel safe outside their school.

“They live with this sense of fear with them,” he said.

Oser combined this fact with the wide-ranging concerns he had heard from parents and teachers when he became principal of the 440-student school in 2005. He decided the school needed a plan that went beyond the expected lessons on nutrition and physical fitness to the heart of what wellness means.

“When 48 percent of the kids are worried about something, you can’t separate the two,” he said of the community and the kids. “You have to look at the full picture.”

The Golden Avenue Comprehensive Wellness Plan, which Oser created with Beck and others, focuses on family wellness, child wellness, environmental wellness and staff wellness.

The family wellness component includes plans for a school-based free clinic, parent education and a case manager who could assist families in getting access to health care.

After-school activities and a wellness teacher are key to the child wellness section. The wellness teacher would give lessons on health, nutrition and fitness to each class one half-day every two weeks.

Working with the city on the safety and appearance of the neighborhood and beautifying the urban campus through murals and a school garden makes up the environmental aspect. The campus is surrounded by the backs of businesses, their loading docks and trash receptacles providing a harsh landscape for children coming to school.

“Being a public school teacher is the most important work in our society, next to being a parent, and our society doesn’t recognize that,” said Beck, who considered being a high school history teacher before pursuing a career in public health.

One of the most innovative parts of the plan focuses on staff wellness. Oser said he hopes to offer his staff classes such as tai chi or yoga and give teachers time to work on personal goals, such as learning something of personal interest, teaching a special skill or working one-on-one with at-risk students.

Oser has set aside time every other month for Beck to hold staff renewal sessions in which teachers do things like reflect on favorite quotes, create collages and receive training in head and neck massage. The next renewal session will include creating a treasure box.

“It's simple stuff that we all benefit from,” said Beck, who has had similar renewal sessions with doctors. “They not only think of their work, but also their own wishes and dreams.”

The Golden Avenue Comprehensive Wellness Plan has the support of the Lemon Grove School District and board. Superintendent Ernie Anastos said focusing on the well-being of students “accomplishes the task of getting our kids readier to learn.

“I feel it's essential that adults, parents, community members, all of us collaborate and focus on wellness,” Anastos said.

The school board, which passed a district policy on wellness two years ago, is completely behind the Golden Avenue efforts, said Katie Dexter, a school board member on the district's Wellness Committee.

Dexter said she would love to see a health clinic inside the school, mainly for prevention. She said many Lemon Grove residents don't have access to health care.

The Golden Avenue School's wellness plan is coming together piecemeal. Some parts, like the after-school activities, cleanup of the school surroundings and the staff rejuvenation sessions, are taking place. Others, like the clinic and wellness teacher, will require grant money, Oser said.

Oser said it will cost \$400,000 a year to accomplish all objectives.

“There's not going to be one funder that says, 'Okay, we'll fund the whole thing,' ” Oser said.

The school received a \$25,000 grant from Alliance Healthcare last year to help find funding. A grant writer has been hired and applications include a plan for a school garden that may be financed by Home Depot and RCP Block and Brick.

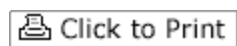
Beck said she believes Alliance Healthcare would be willing to provide money for the health care piece if funding can be found for the other components.

“Our goal is that a year from now, we can say we have this in place, and that in place, the garden's done, the murals done,” Oser said.

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