

Marylyn Sepe, School Nurse-Teacher at LaPerche Elementary School in Smithfield doesn't stand still for very long. During a regular school day she might administer medicine to a second grader, check the temperature of a Kindergartner, bandage the cut knee of a third grader, teach a fourth grade class about germs, and respond to a possible choking situation all before 10 am. Keeping LaPerche students safe and healthy every day is a full time job. But Sepe doesn't let that stop her from devoting considerable time to one of her true passions as an educator - teaching kids about active, healthy living.



"I've been a school nurse for 18 years and I love it," she says. "Teaching students about health, especially good nutrition, is one of my favorite things. You show young minds and young bodies, quite literally, how the decisions they make about what they eat affect how their bodies grow and work. Students this age are eager to learn and eager to try new things. They are also naturally active!"

This school year, Sepe took her health education efforts a step further, coordinating a yearlong program at LaPerche to educate and involve the entire school community in Wellness. The "*Do Amazing Things - Game On! - Ultimate Wellness Challenge*" program, developed by the national organization Action for Healthy Kids (www.actionforhealthykids.org) and funded by a regional New England Dairy and Food Council grant, taught

students at LaPerche how to eat healthier and increase their physical activity. It also involved everyone within the school community - teachers, staff, parents and administration. Integrating the standard curriculum, art, music and P.E. classes, school cafeteria food and snack offerings and special guests from the community, Sepe spearheaded a Wellness Program that supported and promoted the district Wellness Policy.

The "*Game On!*" challenge at LaPerche began with **Fruit and Veggie Week**. Students were challenged to bring in a fruit or vegetable every day for snack time and class participation rates were tracked in the classroom. Sepe worked with John McGrath, ARAMARK's School Food Services Director for La Perche, to present a Harvest Fest celebration in the cafeteria, featuring locally grown apples and fresh pressed apple cider from nearby Jaswell's Farm and Steere Orchards. Students participated in a special apple tasting, voting on which variety they liked best (Golden Delicious won). Allison Jaswell from Jaswell's farm made a guest appearance in the school, helping to connect local farms with the apples and cider the students were tasting. Newsletters home to parents, morning announcements and curriculum tie-ins for teachers and staff highlighted the week's activities and helped to coordinate and enhance fruit and vegetable education school-wide. At the end of the school year, students will bring home vegetable plants in homemade pots to start a garden of their own over the summer.

During **Whole Grains Week**, students were challenged to bring in healthy, whole grains for snacks, the cafeteria served whole grain pancakes at breakfast and whole grain breaded chicken pizza sandwiches for lunch. Parent volunteers donated their time to serve whole grain cinnamon graham snacks school wide, and a guest from Kids First came in to teach students about the importance of eating whole grains. As with Fruit and Veggie Week, parent newsletters, morning announcements and curriculum tie-ins all highlighted the role Whole Grains play in staying healthy. In addition, Sepe began writing letters to the students from her fuzzy-wuzzy "colleague" the La Perche School Health Bear. The Bear Letters, delivered to every classroom and read aloud by teachers, told the students how proud the School Bear was of them while reinforcing key educational concepts about health and wellness. The letters were an upbeat and engaging way to speak directly to the student body about "Game On!" while continuously encouraging them to stay active and eat healthy. The letters offered tips and tricks to help students remember what they had learned from the various activities and events (i.e. "Remember that the healthiest oils are the ones you can pour!")

Dairy Week had the students bringing in healthy dairy snacks and participating in a flavored milk tasting during lunchtime (vanilla milk won). A guest from the NE Dairy Council visited students and Sepe herself got into the mooing spirit by wearing a cow costume, complete with snout, that she created herself. Faculty and staff still smile remembering Sepe driving into school on Dairy Week, a giant blowup black and white cow seated on the passenger seat next to her. Again, parent newsletters, morning announcements, Health Bear letters and curriculum tie-ins ("Let's put PROTEIN on our classroom Word Walls!) deepened the student's awareness about milk and dairy foods.

In the spring, Sepe organized **My Pyramid Week**, focusing on education using the USDA healthy eating visual tool. Students were challenged to use what they had learned over the course of the "Game On!" program to bring in any healthy snack and participate in 1 hour a day of active play. Art classes created colorful plates and lunch boxes of healthy food, fifth graders treated the younger grades to a musical performance about how using the pyramid can help guide you towards the right foods and how exercise needs to be a part of your healthy eating and healthy living plan. Special physical education classes had students competing against one another in relay races to assemble healthy meals from laminated cards featuring a variety of foods. Parent volunteers served a healthy yogurt treat during lunch hour and another visit from a Kids First Chef helped the students understand more fully how to balance the "Whoa" and "Slow" foods with the "Go!" foods so that your body was "eating the rainbow".

With a Wellness Advocate like Marylyn Sepe in their school, La Perche students, staff, teachers and parents have come to see nutrition education and implementation of district Wellness Policies as fun, enjoyable and tasty. From Bear Letters to farm fresh apples to homemade cow costumes, Sepe embraces school wellness and encourages the entire school community to join her. As they swayed to the music, hands gesturing like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, the La Perche fifth graders sang the message out to the rest of the school - *"There's a pyramid. Yes, a pyramid. That can help us eat. As we should. It will help us feel. Real good."* Everyone watching couldn't help but smile. Sepe was beaming.