

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Thomas B. Shea

After E.A. Jones Elementary students in Fort Bend ISD made pizza using vegetables from the school garden, fifth-grader Michael Mensah gives the finished product a sniff before tasting.

## HEALTH

# Schools take fresh approach in fight against child obesity

By Monica Rhor

Inside E.A. Jones Elementary School, the battle against childhood obesity is being fought with fresh ingredients.

Bulletin boards tout the merits of home gardens and expose the tongue-twisting preservatives in junk food. Students take a "food adventurer" pledge, promising to sample new recipes and never to utter the words "yuck" or "gross." Stainless steel bowls burst with a bounty of greens, vegetables and herbs freshly harvested from the school garden.

And fifth-grade chefs sport aprons and spout exuberant reviews of their seed-to-plate

cooking class.

"I love it!" said Andy Jaime, 11, his eyes lighting up behind his glasses. "We learn about different types of food and how to eat healthy."

It's a typical day in the Fort Bend ISD school's culinary classroom, where professional chefs from Recipe for Success guide students through healthy cooking lessons, organic gardening and nutrition education.

The classes are one component of Activate for Kids, a health and fitness pilot program developed by UnitedHealthcare and the United Health Foundation. The program, which kicked off this year in six school

*Fitness continues on A4*

# Fitness is part of program

*Fitness from page A1*

districts in Texas, Florida and Georgia, is among a growing number using a more holistic approach to tackle the childhood obesity epidemic.

In addition to the cooking classes, Activate for Kids runs early morning Zumba aerobics classes for elementary students, an obesity intervention program for kids and their parents, and health and fitness fairs in the Fort Bend and Klein school districts.

In Sharpstown High School, one of 53 schools across the country participating in the Health-Corps program started by Dr. Mehmet Oz, students can take before-school meditation classes or participate in an after-school fitness club.

Recipe for Success, a Houston-based non-profit that offers cooking, gardening and nutrition education classes in 13 Houston-area schools, is expanding its curriculum nationwide by offering online training and certification.

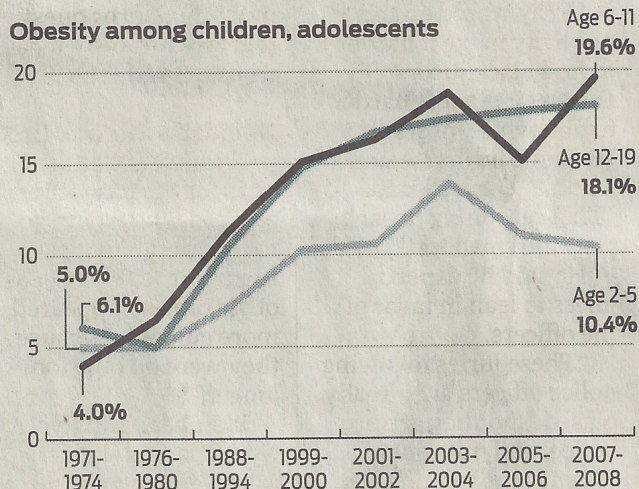
"More and more schools are realizing that this is something they need to do," said Gracie Cavnar, the founder of Recipe for Success. "All the data says weight patterns and food attitudes are set for life by age 11. Early intervention is mandatory."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of children and adolescents are overweight or obese, and

## Child obesity

Across the country, obesity rates among children have soared since the 1980s. Obesity is calculated by body mass index (BMI), a measure of weight-height ratio.

**Obesity among children, adolescents**



*Note: Children are considered "obese" if their BMI is higher than 95 percent of their same-age peers, compared to established growth charts; excludes pregnant teens*

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

McClatchy-Tribune

childhood obesity rates have more than tripled over the past 30 years. Those children are at greater risk of diabetes, hypertension and other illnesses, are more likely to drop out of school, and demonstrate shorter attention spans.

Many of the programs incorporate nutrition education, cooking classes, fitness lessons, goal-setting techniques and emotional wellness tips.

Patterned after the Peace Corps, HealthCorps recruits new college graduates for two-year stints as school coordinators. At Sharpstown High School, Jornae Nevels leads cooking classes, fitness sessions and meditation training.

"It's about exposing them to something new," said Nevels, who also educates students about better food choices.

Activate for Kids offers anti-obesity training for school nurses and serves as a conduit between schools and community resources, said Stephanie

Kellam, the wellness coordinator assigned to Fort Bend ISD. For example, the Recipe for Success classes at Jones Elementary are funded by a United Health Foundation grant.

If a recent fifth-grade cooking class is any indication, the program is already having an impact on the students.

That day, Recipe for Success chef Rakhi Desai — Miss Rakhi to the kids — led the class through the steps for making healthful pizza. The students chopped up fragrant bunches of oregano and parsley, rolled out whole-wheat dough and sprinkled rainbow-hued veggie toppings across the rectangular canvas.

But the real test came after the veggie and pesto pizzas came out of the oven, and everyone got a taste and a chance to review their creation.

"It's delicious!" declared Andy. "I would keep it exactly the way it is."

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