



Community Health Briefs

Minne-Loppet Youth Skiing Program — UCare

Innovation Strategy

Studies show that outdoor activity has many positive effects on school performance and brain development. Benefits include increased confidence and independence, improved ability to overcome challenges, lower risks of obesity and diabetes and strengthened leadership skills.

Recognizing the importance of developing healthy habits in youth, as well as addressing childhood obesity, UCare supports the Minne-Loppet program, which introduces cross-country skiing and healthy eating to inner-city youth at Minneapolis elementary schools as an adjunct to the schools' physical education classes.

Root Determinants of Health Addressed in This Initiative

- Exercise
- Diet
- Health Literacy
- Healthy Thinking
- Education

Program Description

The cross-country (Nordic) ski program is offered by The Loppet Foundation in partnership with UCare, the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, Minneapolis Public Schools and other community sponsors. In addition to providing funding, UCare developed an educational nutrition curriculum for the program to establish healthy behaviors in program participants and their families.

The families of many of the schoolchildren are recent immigrants from countries including Somalia, Thailand, Cambodia and Mexico. Students are also primarily low-income. For many of these kids, this may be the first time they have experienced a snowy winter and they have typically never had access to winter sports. UCare touts cross-country skiing as a great way to encourage physical activity throughout the winter, as well as adjust to Minnesota's climate.

Further, many of the immigrant families are in the process of adapting their diets to American menus. The nutrition curriculum teaches the students and their families about healthy, affordable eating year-round.

The program's effectiveness lies in its hands-on approach to teaching and learning. Rather than preaching about a healthy diet, program leaders make the power of healthy eating real. Kids have fun preparing foods with teachers and coaches, as well as with parents and families at home, while learning how nutritious foods help them improve their physical health. They also get to taste and experience foods they may never have eaten before.

UCare worked with a registered dietician to develop a more formal skiers' nutrition curriculum for replication in other schools, creating and printing five nutritious and easy-to-prepare recipes: Skiers' Breakfast (breakfast trail mix), Skiers' Snack (fruit salad), Skiers' Salad Supper (super salad), Skiers' Treat (yogurt and fruit parfaits) and Skiers' Stir Fry (vegetables and beef stir fry).

Each recipe card explains how its ingredients improve physical well-being and athletic performance. For example, the Skiers' Snack fruit salad recipe card states that flavorful fruits fuel muscles. The Skiers' Breakfast trail mix recipe card explains that whole-grain cereal powers the brain. Recognizing that changes in eating habits are difficult without the involvement of parents, the program urges students to share the recipes with their parents and extended family.

UCare also funds a healthy end-of-year banquet for program participants, their families and program sponsors and donates water bottles, warm hats and scarves to two Minneapolis schools with Minne-Loppet programs.



Kids in the Minne-Loppet program enjoying skiing, many for the first time.

While the ski program runs from November through February, lasting effects are felt throughout the year, with students gaining skills to succeed in school and beyond.

Results

The effect of the Minne-Loppet program is measured anecdotally and by a steadily increasing participant count. It has experienced consistent growth in the number of participating children and schools since the program began in 2004. Thanks to UCare's support, in 2012 the program expanded to include all middle school students at each location and has since expanded to include a ski team at a local high school. The expansion enables the younger students to continue cross-country skiing, and grow their skills, as they age.

The Minne-Loppet Program is easily replicable in wintry climates. The nutrition curriculum can be implemented at any school and the recipe cards are easily reproduced. The key to success is a cooperative partnership with local community organizations, schools and park and recreation boards who come together to launch and execute the program.

Contact Information

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