

Shaping Healthy Habits in School Children

Written by Staff report
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SANTA FE – The New Mexico Department of Health in collaboration with the Public Education Department work year round to promote public health in New Mexico schools.

“School health is much more than ensuring students have access to a nurse at school. Strong school health programs help prevent chronic disease by ensuring students have access to nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity before and after school,” said Department of Health Secretary Retta Ward, MPH. “We know that healthy children miss fewer days of school, and generally perform better academically.”

The Department of Health through the Office of School and Adolescent Health, works closely with the Public Education Department to help schools develop strong wellness and nutrition policies.

The Health Department also funds 54 school-based health centers across the state. They offer a wide array of services, including health assessments, immunizations and mental health counseling.

Some other services provided by the Department at New Mexico schools include:

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- **Oral Health:** The Oral Health Program provides dental sealants and fluoride varnish to pre-school and elementary school-aged children at schools across the state. In the 2013-14 school year, more than 6,100 school-aged children participated in the dental sealant program.
- **Tobacco Prevention:** The Tobacco Use Prevention and Control Program promotes prevention of tobacco use to children in public schools. Strategies include youth engagement in promoting tobacco-free school policies. The program promotes 24/7, which is tobacco-free environments all the time, including before and after school and at school-sponsored events.
- **Reproductive Health:** The Family Planning Program contracts with community organizations to provide an evidence-based educational program called the Teen Outreach Program or TOP. TOP promotes positive youth development with service learning (volunteer work in the community) and curriculum-based activities in a program to decrease teen pregnancy and increase school success.

“We have health programs at schools because that’s where children spend most of their day,” said Office of School and Adolescent Health Director Yolanda Montoya-Cordova, MSW. “We also work closely with the After School Alliance so that they can incorporate activities that promote health. This can help our children realize that they have to make healthy choices all day, even after the school day ends.”

The Department of Health will be hosting the 19th Annual Head to Toe Conference April 15-17 at the Albuquerque Convention Center. The conference is the state’s premier event for school health professionals, and welcomes everyone from school nurses to guidance counselors – all working to improve student health and academic success.

Please visit the 2015 Head 2 Toe website for more information attendhead2toe.com.