

“The longest-lived people eat a plant-based diet. They eat meat but only as a condiment or a celebration. Nothing they eat has a plastic wrapper.” — Dan Buettner, author of “The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest”

SCHOOL GAINS BLUE ZONES PROJECT APPROVAL



Students get ready to celebrate the school's Blue Zones Project recognition. BLUE ZONES PROJECT OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

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Bonita Springs Charter School is at the top of the class with the Blue Zones Project of Southwest Florida.

The tuition-free public charter school with 1,270 students from kindergarten through eighth grade is the first Blue Zones Project approved school in Bonita Springs. The school is located at 25380 Bernwood Drive.

Recognized as a Lighthouse School for its achievements in “The Leader in Me,” part of the FranklinCovey’s leadership program, the school has always been focused on good health and wellness of its students, Erin Sidwell, school enrollment administrator, said.

Pursuing the Blue Zones Project designation was a natural goal to undertake.

“We have been working on this designation for a long time,” she said.

The Blue Zones Project was introduced to Southwest Florida in 2015 based on the travels of National Geographic explorer Dan Buettner, who identified communities worldwide where people share lifestyle traits and live to 100 or older. He wrote a New York Times bestseller about the nine principles of longevity.

The “Power Nine” include moving naturally by being physically active, eating a plant-slant diet, knowing your purpose in life, taking time to relax, having a healthy social network and putting loved ones first.

Other principles include participating in a religious community, limiting alcohol consumption, and stopping to eat when you are 80 percent full.

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The Blue Zones Project aligns with the school's mission to inspire students to lead and succeed, Carissa Carroll, the school's principal, said.

"A healthy lifestyle is a driver for a healthy mind," Carroll in a news release. "I knew by bringing the Blue Zones Project to our school, I would be helping our students and our team members have more opportunities to enjoy good health and therefore, maximize learning

A year ago, the school installed Brita Hydration Water Stations in key locations for students to encourage their water consumption and they are encouraged to bring reusable water bottles to keep during the day.

"All our vending machines are healthy," she said. "You won't see chips and cookies, and there's no soda on campus. The student vending machines were changed out for more healthier options."

The school has a half-hour recess all elementary school students, where the students do 10 minutes of calisthenics and there is 20 minutes of free play to burn off energy, Sidwell said. The half-hour recess is before or after lunch.

"It does allow them to run wild," she said.

There are two physical education classes that are offered in eight-day cycles. There are two playgrounds on campus, and shade elements are installed at one of the playgrounds and is in the process of being added over the middle-school playground.

Bonita Charter is one of 200 Lighthouse Schools worldwide through "The Leader in Me" school transformation process that is demonstrating measurable results, Sidwell said. The school garden is one example of how students are learning to be leaders.

The garden is planted, cared for and harvested with all of the produce donated to Café of Life in Bonita Springs, which cares for working poor residents and



Bonita Springs Charter School celebrates its Blue Zones Project approval on Feb. 26. BLUE ZONES PROJECT OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

the homeless in the community with food and other support. The students made the decision to donate the produce to Café of Life.

"All of our decisions are student led in terms of our projects for the community," Sidwell said. "All our projects are student led."

The school held its ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate it joining the Blue Zones Project designation on Feb. 26, the same day as its annual Leadership Day to showcase to the community how the school is a valued part of the community.

To date, more than 126 organizations in Collier and Lee counties have gained Blue Zones Project recognition.