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Blue Zones Project - SWFL

## Active children are healthier, with good lifelong habits

It is well understood that the earlier in life we adopt healthy habits, the more ingrained they become. For example, we know that children who are physically active and eat more fruits and vegetables are more likely to be carry these behaviors into adulthood. We all have an opportunity to help set our children up for healthier, happier and longer lives.

This is why Blue Zones Project collaborates with preschools, K-12 grade schools and universities. Currently, 13 preschools, 35 schools, and three colleges and universities are participating in the project to help make healthier choices easier for students.

When we work with K-12 schools, we ask not only the principal but also the teachers, parents and students to help decide what well-being best practices they'd like to implement in their school.

There are no mandates, only choices. In many cases, they may form a youth-based wellness committee. This allows students to learn leadership skills while making suggestions to their school's leadership as to what well-being activities will most resonate with the students.

For example, at the Bonita Springs Charter School, the students decided to use the Blue Zones Project Power 9<sup>®</sup> longevity principles as monthly themes throughout the school year. During January, they focused on "Move Naturally," followed by "Purpose" and "Family First" in February and March, respectively. The Power 9 theme for April is "downshift."

In addition to the students, many local teachers are champions at promoting and encouraging student well-being throughout the school day. Coach Joanne Vukobratovich at Lake Park Elementary engages more than 90% of her students in active play before school starts.

This is critically important, as before-school activity allows kids to burn off energy and interact with their peers. This activity then primes them to start their first class wide-awake

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# Habits

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and ready to learn.

“At Lake Park Elementary, we are always looking for ways to seamlessly infuse kinesthetic academic play into the learning day,” Vukobratovich said. “I think of it as owning my own business and striving to make my patrons (students) happy so they can’t wait to come back.”

Another inspiring teacher at Lake Park Elementary, Nancy Garousi, incorporates building and maintaining a garden into her classroom education.

Garousi explains, “Last Wednesday, we took the tomatoes that we harvested over the past two months and created a homemade red sauce. We then enjoyed everything on Friday during our Grammar Cafe.”

She also describes how her students fashioned a salad delivery business during Random Acts of Kindness Week.

“The children took orders from teachers, harvested lettuce and tomatoes, then cleaned, packed and delivered salads with student-created labels that read, ‘From The Garousi’s Growers, Packed with Love and Kindness.’ It was pretty cool!”

Lorenzo Walker Technical High School and College teacher and Blue Zones Project champion Dulcie Neiman explains her school’s involvement: “We are keeping healthy initiatives alive with the building of a garden, continuing our walk-a-thons, and staying active

with a teacher-student volleyball and pickleball tournaments.”

In Israel Caraza’s GED class, students have participated in Blue Zones Project purpose workshops. “Thank you for the treasure trove of information in the workshops; the students really benefit,” Caraza said.

At Florida SouthWestern State College, science instructor Kirk Otto shares why he has been introducing students to Blue Zones Project’s best practices over the past three years.

“I try to lead by example, and hopefully the healthy lifestyle I support here will help students to have a better, healthier and happier life,” he said. “These students are our future, and if I can give them the tools and knowledge to better themselves, then I have done my job as a teacher.”

Blue Zones Project School Lead Joe Stoner explains why helping youth thrive is critical: “Due, in part, to rising childhood obesity rates and resulting chronic diseases in youth, the research suggests our youngest generation is at risk of not enjoying as long a lifespan as their parents.”

If your child’s school is not yet involved in Blue Zones Project, you can become a champion and help get them involved. To do so, call Joe Stoner at 239-331-6319.

All day cares, preschools and K-12 schools, public and private, in Collier County, Bonita Springs and Estero are eligible for participation. There is no cost for school involvement, as the Blue Zones Project is 100% funded by NCH Healthcare System.