

BLUE ZONES

“Keep your vitality. A life without health is like a river without water.” – Maxime Lagacé



Bonita Springs Charter School Principal Carissa Carroll jump ropes with students at a Blue Zones Project event. SPECIAL TO THE NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Blue Zones Project Schools earn an ‘A’ in well-being

By Robin DeMattia

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Joe Stoner, a former teacher and school superintendent for 40 years in upstate New York, had an epiphany that led him to the Blue Zones Project.

“I realized school was going down the wrong road when we talked about testing,” he said. “But when we focused on well-being, and not just students but the entire school community, everything improved from attendance to performance to discipline.”

Stoner said helping young people develop healthy habits for life is one of the most important lessons schools can teach.

“Data shows that we’re dying younger for the first time since the 1960s. We are a population that is less healthy than we’ve ever been. And being unhealthy can make us more susceptible to disease and viruses. That makes Blue Zones Project even more pertinent to the youth of America.”

As the Schools and Youth Coordinator for Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, Stoner’s mission is to help local school administrators and teachers see how easy it is to blend Blue Zones concepts into their existing operations. Many schools are already moving in the right direction by focusing on healthy foods and beverages on their campus, offering a variety of physical fitness programs, and incorporating mindfulness practices.

“Blue Zones Project of Southwest Florida has been a very welcome addition and support for Collier County Public Schools (CCPS),” shared Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kamela Patton.

“Although student and staff wellness has always been a priority for CCPS, the

partnership with Blue Zones Project has elevated the importance and awareness of physical, nutritional, and mental/emotional well-being across our schools and District. Blue Zones Project is a true partnership in supporting our efforts to make the healthy choice the easy choice for all members of our community, especially our students and staff.”

More than two dozen schools in Collier and Lee counties participate in Blue Zones Project, with teachers volunteering as the wellness champion for their school.

Joann Vukobratovich, a health and physical education teacher at Village Oaks Elementary, finds creative ways to integrate Blue Zones Project into her curriculum.

“Blue Zones Power 9 principles were a seamless fit to our existing health and wellness learning goals as well as for cross-content connections, whether it be math, music, art, or geography,” she said.

For example, last fall she invited students to participate in a “Planksgiving” contest to see who could hold a plank position while reciting the 50 states in alphabetical order.

The school also has a wellness committee comprised of teachers, faculty, parents and students. Vukobratovich said it gives students an opportunity to develop leadership skills and “creates lessons that instill healthy concepts from school to home to community.”

When she worked at Lake Park Elementary, students combined math skills like tracking data in bar graphs as they watched what happened if they maintained or didn’t maintain their school garden, which was also teaching them about healthy eating.

Juniace Etienne, a French teacher at Barron Collier High School, involved her

students in a Blue Zones Project Purpose Workshop.

“They loved the idea of coming up with not only their purpose but a purpose statement. It helps them now understand why they do certain things in class and what to do with this knowledge.”

Members of the school’s French Honor Society also volunteered with Blue Zones Project at community events. “It gave them an opportunity to share their talents where they could serve,” Etienne said.

Nicole Bien, a special education inclusion teacher at Pine Ridge Middle, said her school focuses on the messages of “stay active” and “eat healthy.” They held a healthy weight contest, have one of the largest groups that participate in the district’s 5K, held student-run field days, and started a Hip Hop Dance Club led and choreographed by students.

They also established a school garden where students stay active by planting, weeding and harvesting. They then eat healthy by enjoying the tomatoes, peppers, watermelon, strawberries and other items they grow.

“Our outdoor classroom reinforces being outdoors, getting fresh air, being active,” Bien said. “I’m able to teach a lot through the garden.”

Bonita Springs Charter School made several changes through becoming certified with Blue Zones Project in 2015. They added hydration stations, healthy vending machine products, a walking steps program from buses to classrooms, a healthy lunch program for staff, and a health and wellness student leadership team. They also include an article about a Blue Zones concept each month in the newsletter emailed to parents.

“Our students are eager to learn

about healthier ways of living, about nutrition and the importance of moving,” said Sandra Kasetaitė, special education teacher. “They are eager to teach their families and other students and the local communities.”

As participants in a charter school, parents are required to volunteer, which ties into another Blue Zones concept. However, Principal Carissa Carroll said this has been a challenge since the pandemic began.

“We need extra support, especially on the playground,” Carroll said. Only two of the school’s six playgrounds are being used, and the equipment needs to be sanitized continuously.

The school also needs equipment that students can use socially distanced for physical activity, such as jump ropes, and volunteers to lead students in these activities.

Volunteers can also help virtually by reading to students or participating in career day.

To volunteer at Bonita Springs Charter School, contact Mrs. Natalie Dahlke at ndahlke@bonitaspringscharter.org.

“Youth are very receptive to the Blue Zones Project message,” Stoner concluded. “It gets really amplified when there are strong teacher role models and administrators who are investing in it.”

To learn how your school can get involved with Blue Zones Project, email Joseph.Stoner@sharecare.com.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is a vital part of Southwest Florida’s well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information about Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.