

## Conference promotes healthy children

By DAN SERNOFFSKY Staff Writer

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Assisted by Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Omar Gaither, Sharon Plano of the Mid-Atlantic Dairy Association leads warmup exercises at the Keystone Health Promotion Conference Wednesday at Lebanon Valley College. (LEBANON DAILY NEWS - GORDON OLIVER)

ANNVILLE -- Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Omar Gaither was the featured attraction, and while he autographed some footballs which were given as prizes, his real purpose was to help promote the Fuel Up to Play 60 program, one of eight partners involved in the Keystone Health Promotion Conference held at Lebanon Valley College Wednesday.

The statewide health-promotion conference drew health and physical-education teachers, school nurses, community health educators and other advocates of health promotion.

"We're trying to show schools how they can bring

health programs to schools and to the community," said Susan McGreevy, chairman of the conference.

Thanks in part to Gaither, much of the attention at the conference was focused on the Fuel Up to Play 60 program, a program designed to promote healthy eating and physical activity for youngsters. Affiliated with the American Dairy Council and the Action for Healthy Kids program, a nationwide coalition promoting physical activity among youth.

"It's a fairly new program," said Sam Monismith of Penn State-Harrisburg, a planning committee member for the conference. "The Fuel Up to Play 60 program encourages kids to be active. Today, kids are much more sedentary, much less active. They're spending their time in front of computer and television screens and not getting outside.

That, Monismith pointed out, is leading to children being overweight or obese, conditions which place them at risk for future problems like high blood

pressure and diabetes.

The Fuel Up to Play 60 program and the American Dairy Council reached out to the NFL to help promote those programs.

"Kids look up to pro athletes," said Monismith.

One of the goals of the program is to further promote physical education in schools, a goal that has been difficult to reach.

"Physical education has taken a few steps back," Monismith said. "It's not viewed as a core subject area, and the emphasis on test scores has taken away from physical education.

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"But research doesn't support that. Kids who are physically active -- physically fit -- do better academically."

Some conference attendees were optimistic about the future of physical-education programs in schools.

"Programs like (Fuel Up to Play 60) are having an impact," said Alenna Pistentis, a health-and-physical-education teacher at Halifax Middle School, "but it comes down to who takes action. Everybody knows it -- the problems with childhood obesity -- but not enough people are doing anything about it."

That fact that a slowly increasing number of people are willing to take action is making a difference.

"Things like this (the conference) give me hope," Pistentis said.

"The obesity problem has gone from something like 10 percent to 35 percent," said attendee Rob Bare, a physical-education teacher at Ebenezer Elementary and coach of Cedar Crest High School's high-achieving boys' track team. "The problem is that we have a PR problem, a personal-responsibility problem. People are not taking responsibility for their eating habits or for taking part in physical activity, and research shows that students who are active physically will do better academically."

Part of the problem, Pistentis noted, is the fact that physical education is often denigrated by the education establishment.

"I find myself defending how important it is to be active," she said. "I hear it all the time, that 'it's just gym class.' In physical education, we try to promote

lifetime sports, things in which youngsters can do themselves or engage friends and family."

"We're trying to give kids the skills they can use for the rest of their lives," said Bare. "Everybody can enjoy some sort of cardiovascular work."

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