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## Healthy 'Revolution'

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ELK RAPIDS - Cherryland Middle School is a healthy place to be. That's according to the Michigan Action for Healthy Kids.

Under the guidance of Health Education and Life Skills teacher Jami Gray, the school recently received recognition as a "School of Excellence" for their efforts to promote proper nutrition, physical activity, and tobacco-free lifestyles among their students and staff.

Gray started working with the school district years ago to address concerns about students' health and well-being.

"The news about our young generation is scary," Gray said. "It's the first to have a shorter life expectancy than the generation before it. Childhood obesity in Michigan is at 32 percent. The percentage of children using drugs, alcohol and tobacco is heading higher each year. Cherryland Middle School is taking this challenge head on."

She turned to Michigan's HSAT – Healthy School Action Tools – for support. The HSAT are online tools that assist Michigan schools in creating healthier environments, because "schools that support healthy choices help students achieve their academic potential."

To help schools monitor their progress, the Michigan Action for Healthy Kids sponsors The Healthy School Environment Recognition Program (HSERP). The program is designed "to recognize and applaud schools that are making significant improvements in their environment related to healthy eating, physical activity and tobacco-free lifestyles".

HSERP rates schools in five categories: Planning and Oversight, Policies, Physical Activity, Healthy Eating, and Tobacco-Free Lifestyles. Cherryland Middle School recently earned 137 out of 198 possible points, earning a Second-Place: School of Excellence award.

"We were tested in eight categories," said Gray. "Some of these things we didn't change, they were already happening (at the school)."

One such program, started in 2006, is PULSE – Preventing Unhealthy Life Styles Everyday.

"After a discussion at our K-12 Health Committee I suggested that we have students more involved in health decisions at our school," said Gray. "The team (of 20 seventh

and eighth graders) works with our food service director. They taste-test healthy food, give their opinion on suggestions for new food choices, and provide ideas to re-design the lunchroom.”

#### Wake-up call

More recently, the middle school started performing morning calisthenics.

“Our physical education and health teachers worked together gathering information from other countries and schools to create what we feel is an outstanding 3-4 minute routine,” Gray said. “We incorporated aerobics and ‘brain gym’ to really get our kids awake and ready to learn. An overwhelming majority of staff has seen an amazing difference in our students as they head to first hour. (They) are more alert and ready to learn.”

It's not just the students who are benefiting, though. The staff received training in CPR, first aid, and asthma response, and they're working hard to be good fitness examples for the kids

“Our staff joins (calisthenics) each day,” Gray says. They also participate in fitness contests, such as the recent Pedometer Challenge, dividing into teams and tracking their distances over a two-month period.

All of these combined efforts are helping Gray and the health committee achieve its goals for a healthier school. Their action plan includes many healthier food options, like better concession stand food and homemade meals for breakfast and lunch. They are also looking to other schools and state based activity programs for ideas to continue to promote student health.

“We have a generation of children in need of help to get healthy,” added Gray. “The adaptations will really help our students understand the need to be strong, healthy teenagers (who make) great decisions that will affect the rest of their lives.”

For more information on Michigan's healthy school initiatives, visit [www.mihealthtools.org](http://www.mihealthtools.org). To learn more about Cherryland Middle School's health programs and goals, contact Jami Gray at [jgray@elkrapids.k12.mi.us](mailto:jgray@elkrapids.k12.mi.us).

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