

Walk this way: Students get healthy

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Photos by Rachel Mummey/The Herald

Holland Elementary students participated in some morning stretches at the Hank and Eloise Henke Stadium in Holland Park on Tuesday before walking to school. A new wellness committee at the school hosted the walk, before which students from every grade gathered at the park to eat breakfast together and stretch. Among the students stretching were kindergartners, first row, Colton Obermeier, left, Ellie Bardwell, Avah Montgomery, and second row, Tallan Wibbeler, left, Kara Schmitt, and Jasmyne Park.

By CLAIRE MOORMAN

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HOLLAND — Mulch and leaves crunched underfoot as a long train of about 170 young students marched, jumped and giggled on their way to school Tuesday morning.

The Holland Elementary School kids had all ditched the usual buses and car rides from mom and dad to breathe the fresh air in Holland Park and get some exercise. The walk to school was organized by the school's newly formed wellness committee, headed by special needs teacher Lindsey Sickbert. Parents and buses dropped the students off at Holland Park for breakfast early in the morning.

"We're going to help you get healthier!" Sickbert yelled to a group of students who had gathered in the bleachers of the Hank and Eloise Henke Stadium at around 7:30 a.m. She led the kids in a round of stretches to warm them up for their trek.

Meanwhile, fourth-grader Hunter Harris and classmates Charbel Alcantara, Leah O'Brien and Hannah Barnett enjoyed muffins while they waited excitedly for the walking to begin. The students usually ride the bus to and from school, so they agreed they enjoyed the opportunity for fresh air.

"It's fun to walk," Leah said. Charbel added that he wanted to explore the nature in the park. The students' route took them on a path by the park's lake, over a hill and to the back door of the school building.

The walking event and the school's wellness committee were both formulated at the beginning of the semester, when all four Dubois County school corporations received money from the Welborn Baptist Foundation as part of a community transformation grant. The Evansville organization was awarded about \$3 million from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to strengthen healthy living in southwest Indiana and chose to divide that money to pay for staff training and some health activities at schools in Dubois and Pike counties for two years.

Each school then created a committee of teachers, parents and administrators to discuss ways to improve community health through school activities and attend training. Committee leaders from each school group have met to share their ideas.

"We did a school health index just to identify our strengths and weaknesses as far as health goes. Our (physical education) program was strong, our cafeteria and health food options were good," Sickbert said. "Our weakness was staff wellness and community involvement."



Holland Elementary first-graders Caleb Brown, left, Maddux Marshall, Parker DeLaGrange and Dylan Waters took in the sights as they walked with fellow students through Holland Park on their way to school Tuesday morning.

Teachers and administrators have begun adding health tips to the school's weekly newsletter which is sent home to parents. The committee members also are working on plans to start a student walking club in the mornings next school year.

At Huntingburg Elementary School, wellness committee co-coordinator Leslie Denu said the group had the same idea. Because students often gather in the gym before school to wait for the first bell, it seemed a perfect opportunity to promote exercise.

"Our students get here pretty early," Denu said. "Instead of just sitting in the gym after they eat breakfast, they'll be walking."

Denu said the staff will soon have the opportunity to join an optional walking group that eventually can morph into a more advanced workout group. A health index survey revealed that the school also had a problem with faculty wellness.

Most of the new wellness activities at local schools will begin next year.

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