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Scores of Newark Teachers Attend ‘Healthy Schools’ Initiative at NJMS

NEWARK—Eight years ago, then-graduate student Hanaa Hamdi came to Newark to study obesity. Little did she know that her work would one day launch a crusade to change how people live and eat in the city.

“Where we live dictates what we eat and how we live,” Hamdi, who now holds a Joint PhD in Urban Health and Environment from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and the New Jersey Institute of Technology, School of Architecture, told an audience of more than 100 teachers, staffers and other guests during a recent kick off of her “Healthy Schools” initiative. The program, based at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, is part of a project called the “Healthy Living Initiative,” an ambitious intervention program that tackles behavioral, cultural, social and structural barriers to healthy living in low-income neighborhoods. Stemming from Hamdi’s doctoral study, a comprehensive examination of the relationship between neighborhood food environments and residents’ food acquisition practices, the initiative aims to improve communities and their access to more healthful and affordable foods.

During the event—which also featured Zumba lessons—Hamdi, an assistant professor in New Jersey Medical School’s Department of Family Medicine, shared information with attendees about her research which found that, among other things, age, health literacy, food insecurity, food prices, zoning designation, community-level violence and segregation were some of the factors that affected how or whether people eat. In some cases, Hamdi reported meeting mothers who confided that they do not eat during the day, so their children can eat at night.

In addition to working with children and their families, Hamdi studied school food environments of Newark’s preschools by analyzing school menus for a year; observing teachers and students at mealtime; and interviewing administrators, teachers and kitchen staff to learn what they understand not just about healthy food, but also about the policies that impact what children eat at school.

Teachers play an important role in the initiative because of their status as role models, said Hamdi, who has become affectionately known in the community as the “Fruits and Vegetables” Doctor. “This program is not about weight loss. It’s about changing your lifestyle; changing culture. It’s about living healthy and providing the tools and resources that will help you to make healthy choices, even when options are limited,” Hamdi said.

Over the next six months, teachers enrolled in the program will undergo baseline medical and physical examinations; receive individualized and group instructions to promote their health literacy and increase their physical activity levels; and will be offered cooking classes at Star Career Academy, a Newark-based culinary school.



New Jersey Medical School

Time management and budgeting play important roles in healthy living said guest speakers Dee Marshall, a life coach, and Tiffany “The Budgetnista” Aliche, a best-selling author who teaches financial literacy. Both women delivered lively and insightful presentations and advice that served to inspire audience members to make the changes necessary to lead successful and happy lives.

In addition to working for the Newark Preschool Council—a “Healthy Schools” collaborator—Loretta Sanford and Robin Brown also serve as health educators for the program. It is work they find gratifying.

“It is important for teachers to understand nutrition so they can inform others about the benefits,” Sanford, a nurse with the Newark Preschool Council, said. “I think this program is going to be very powerful.”

A family advocate with the Newark Preschool Council, Brown has already personally experienced the benefits of living a more healthful life. “The program has helped me to lose weight by turning the whites (breads and rice) into browns; incorporating more fruits and vegetables in my diet; and teaching my kids to eat right.”

More about Healthy Living Initiative

Begun in the South Ward of Newark, Healthy Living Initiative is a systems-based intervention model that will be tailored and expanded to each of Newark’s wards.

The Initiative is split into phases. The first phase focuses on behavioral modification and comprises two components: “Healthy Families” and “Healthy Schools.” Healthy Families has worked to provide preschool children and their families with access to fresh produce, personalized physical activities, health literacy and cooking demonstrations. Healthy Schools delivers information to preschool teachers that could help them to become healthier and to make the learning environment—where preschool children consume about two-thirds of their calories a day—more effective.

The second phase of the initiative focuses on revitalizing local neighborhood food environments and development of local and federal policies that promote access to nourishing and affordable food options.

The third phase, which focuses on the physical structure (e.g. public spaces, housing, and zoning designation) of Newark, is geared toward addressing the safety issues that plague the city and serve as barriers to healthy living.