

## “I Feel Good” Health Initiative

*FamiliesFORWARD*  
Cincinnati, Ohio

*“Whoa! I feel good. . .  
. . . and I feel nice, like sugar and spice.”*

**F**amiliesFORWARD looked to the famous James Brown song to name its “I Feel Good” Health Initiative, hoping to show families in Cincinnati schools that, with their own hard work toward healthy lifestyles, they could share the sentiments of the “Hardest Working Man in Show Business.”

FamiliesFORWARD aims to provide comprehensive services to the schools it works with, and as the health initiative shows, the organization holds strong to its mission. From a modest start in 2001, the health program has expanded to five schools with a health curriculum and health fairs that serve hundreds of people every year. The benefits are far-reaching: students become more alert in class and miss fewer days of school; parents learn how to promote good health by cooking nutritious meals and encouraging exercise; teachers gain health-related information to add to their curriculum and learn from the community partners; and the district gains free resources from community and business partners for its schools, students, and families.

Among the highlights of the health initiative:

- A health education program serves more than 350 students in five schools, providing nutrition education, health information, and exercise programs.
- Partnerships with 30 local health agencies, recreation centers, and clinics bolster the health education program.

- Health fairs attract at least 500 people from the community and include blood pressure screenings, a student poster contest, exercise and dance activities led by a local disc jockey, and healthy food served by local restaurants.
- A relaxation therapist teaches students techniques that help them reduce stress during testing times.
- The health program curriculum meets the academic content standards for Ohio.

FamiliesFORWARD undertook the initiative after the Cincinnati Health Department published data showing that families living in the communities served by the agency’s school-based programs had the highest risk for heart disease, asthma, diabetes, and other debilitating health problems. At the same time, budget cuts in these schools forced a reduction in school nursing services. FamiliesFORWARD staff also observed students skipping lunch in favor of junk food after school, and teachers expressed frustration about frequent absenteeism and students’ lack of attention.

Given all of these factors, the agency launched the “I Feel Good” Health Initiative to educate and motivate students and families to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Its goals were to:

- Teach children and parents strategies for addressing health needs
- Link students and families to available health programs
- Reduce student absenteeism

FamiliesFORWARD brought together several community partners, scheduled meet-

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ings, produced all the materials, and raised funds. The group decided to start a formal health education program in the schools that was fun, educational, and motivational. The program began in two schools, with 30 students identified as overweight and their families. Extensive evaluations showed that these children and their families learned about nutrition, exercised more regularly, kept health care appointments, and reduced absenteeism. The students, however, did feel singled out because of their weight problems, and the program moved quickly to include all students.

“The success of the first year of the ‘I Feel Good’ Health Initiative motivated FamiliesFORWARD to permanently adopt this practice,” said agency representatives. The initial grant of \$50,000 from the Ohio Commission on Minority Health continues to run the program at about \$3,000 a year for classes in nutrition and exercise. Other committed partners support parent classes, health fairs, school staff initiatives, and after-school activities.

FamiliesFORWARD is a private, non-profit organization providing individual support for students and families; after-school, parenting, and summer programs; community events; and volunteer recruitment. “Together with their partners, FamiliesFORWARD works to create confident, capable children; strong, nurturing families; successful schools, and engaged, active, and supportive communities.” Plus, healthy students who feel good.

*Betti Hinton, President*  
(513) 721-7044  
[bettihinton@familiesforward.net](mailto:bettihinton@familiesforward.net)