

### ***About The Healthy Schools Partnership – an Interview with Rhona Applebaum***

*As a Ph.D. and as Vice President and Chief Scientific and Regulatory Officer of The Coca-Cola Company, Rhona Applebaum has been closely involved with The Healthy Schools Partnership project*

*The Healthy Schools Partnership (HSP) is a school-based program that combines practical nutrition education with innovative physical activity education to promote health and wellness among kids at play. While a number of excellent programs promote healthy eating and physical fitness, none combine both, as they do in HSP, to ensure that students grasp the concept of energy balance. The program uses Nutrition Coaches (Registered Dietitians) to motivate students, alongside PE teachers (trained through the PE4life program). Utilizing this novel approach, HSP's three partners – the American Council for Fitness & Nutrition Foundation, the American Dietetic Association Foundation (ADAF), and PE4life – have challenged traditional methods and have helped to revolutionize the teaching of nutrition and physical activity (fitness) education.*

**Question:** *The Coca-Cola Company was one of the first companies to endorse and financially support the Healthy Schools Partnership. Why did the company get involved in this particular project, and has it been worth the investment of resources?*

**Rhona Applebaum:** The Healthy School Partnership was particularly appealing because it provided a model to address one of the three pillars of the Healthy Weight Commitment – schools. The other two pillars, of course, are the marketplace and the workplace. But schools are fundamental, because this is where we as a society can help create and educate our children about sensible, balanced diets and the importance of physical activity. And studies show that kids who learn healthy habits early are more likely to carry these habits with them into adulthood.

Further, schools are 'change agents', and you need look no farther than the environment and recycling as prime examples of driving change at this level. Who brought, or should I say taught, the practices of waste recycling and composting to millions of American families—our children, and they learned about caring for the environment in school. So it is in schools that children can and should be taught the building blocks for an active, healthy lifestyle—and help bring and reinforce these practices in the home.

We're proud to be involved. The HSP is introducing some challenging methods of motivating and promoting an active, healthy lifestyle. It's really revolutionizing the teaching of nutrition and physical activity education—and it's about time!

**Question:** *What are some of the things the HSP has learned?*

**Rhona Applebaum:** First, let's discuss who the HSP is and what it was designed to do. The HSP is a triumvirate of three organizations with the necessary expertise to educate and motivate children on the concept of energy balance. Energy balance—at its most basic—is about calories in and calories out, and the need to ensure balance. Too many calories in, not enough expended, you gain weight. Keep them in balance, you maintain your weight. Use more calories than you take in, and you lose weight. May sound like an easy task, but it's not. Further, there are aspects of a sensible, balanced diet that go beyond calories, as there are with the

health benefits of being fit. Like I said, no easy task. So three expert organizations, the American Council for Fitness & Nutrition Foundation, the American Dietetic Association Foundation (ADAF), and PE4life worked together to design an approach that combines practical nutrition education with innovative physical activity education to promote health and wellness learning among kids.

One of the most important things we learned early on is that the optimum age for encouraging healthy habits is between the ages of 6 and 12 years. Children at in this age range are the most likely to engage.

We also learned that burdening the teachers with additional subjects to teach—especially specialized subjects like nutrition and physical activity –was not the most productive way to achieve our goals. We needed to make sure the teaching of these subjects was not yet another burden we were placing on them. Lord knows teachers have a full plate already—they have standards of learning to contend with in addition to all their other responsibilities.

**Question:** *What are some of the basics of HSP?*

**Rhona Applebaum:** To begin with, there are the three basic “hows” as related to diet, physical activity, and health – “how to,” “how much,” and “how often.” In schools, they should be right up there with the three ‘Rs’ of a solid education. And to teach these ‘hows’ we need people with the necessary expertise.

For Physical Activity, HSP uses PE teachers, trained through PE4life Academies. These physical activity ‘coaches’ are passionate about motivating and helping students understand the benefits from being physically active.

Another important area of expertise introduced by HSP came from the ADA Foundation, where a core curriculum was used to train Registered Dietitians and nutritionists on how best to teach sound nutrition and the concept of energy balance. By bringing together the two sides of the energy balance equation through nutrition and physical activity coaches, these health concepts can be taught holistically and with greater success.

So in brief, the PE and nutrition coaches are aligned and working together to help children understand the importance of a sensible, balanced diet and regular physical activity to their health, and implement what they learn into their daily lives. In addition, the experts can provide an additional “support system” for students who need to talk through personal issues, discover who they are as individuals and to build their self-esteem.

**Question:** *Has the HSP encountered resistance from kids who are used to sweets whenever they want, or for that matter their parents?*

**Rhona Applebaum:** Part of the message is that “You don’t need to give up sweets.” We all know that “no”, “don’t” and “avoid” are not helpful. We need to help children learn how to put it all together and understand good dietary habits – calories in and calories out. All foods and beverages can fit into a healthy diet and active lifestyle. Again, it’s about the “how to, how much and how often.”

**Question:** *The HSP seems to have been getting great results in Kansas City, where it started. How far do you see it going? Will it become a nation-wide project?*

**Rhona Applebaum:** It was never the intent of the Healthy Schools Partnership to be nationalized, but rather to have the concept of energy balance and the model ‘viralized.’ Try to think of this more in terms of equivalence vs. exactness as it relates to the type of program. However, one can’t deny the benefits of using professionals in the school to carry this message on nutrition and physical activity. As an aside, this is another career path for Registered Dietitians, as teachers in schools. It’s really a win-win-win—for the profession, for the teachers and most importantly our kids.

**Question:** *How visible has the impact of the HSP been?*

**Rhona Applebaum:** As the program has evolved, we’ve began to clearly see the benefits. Kids are fitter, happier, scholastics have gone up, ‘naughtiness’ has gone down. It’s all about each child achieving his or her “personal best” so we’ve also seen self-esteem increase. Not everyone can be an elite athlete, but all kids want to be included—all kids love to play—it’s in their DNA. They also like to compete so it’s great when they can say they “beat their personal best.” Another thing: It’s about the individual, not the team. That gives kids a clear incentive to achieve all they can. The kids try to break their own record. They get “report cards” on their health. This is what helps to motivate them.

Under the HSP, the goal of healthy living is pervasive. There are lots of reminders in participating schools to be active and live healthy. The children make storyboards about energy balance. The storyboards say things like: “If you eat that sundae, play more soccer.” The cafeterias have “power picks”, food choices of the day. Kids make posters themselves to constantly reinforce the energy balance concept. It’s a constant message, and it certainly seems to be getting through. And why shouldn’t it? Energy balance is about trade-offs, and what better subset of humans to understand trade-offs than kids...as in, “Susie, if you don’t make your bed, no movies” or “Johnny, no picking up these toys, no ice cream.” Trust me, they’re wizards at trade-offs, they practice it every day.

In the end, success will mean hitting each of the following outcomes—and I can only hope in rapid succession

- HSP or similar models expanded significantly
- State requirements for physical activity/fitness education and nutrition education in schools
- Federal mandate and support for an energy balance curriculum in schools that establishes Standards for Health and Fitness equal to that of current Standards for Learning

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