

Teacher gets elementary kids moving on the track **By Pete Colaizzo**

Running columnist

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It's easy to wring your hands and fret over such overarching societal issues as "childhood obesity." It's easy to say what a shame it is, how our kids need to get off the couch, to put down their video-game joysticks and get moving, how our culture festers such abhorrent behavior.

| Yes, it's easy to talk the talk.

| When it comes to combating childhood obesity, Barbara Kurdziel of Pleasant Valley walks the walk.

| The fifth-grade teacher at Joseph D'Aquanni West Road Intermediate School created a before-school program called "Healthy Mind, Healthy Body, Healthy You" this past school year.

| The idea was simple: Students would come to school a bit early, at 8 a.m., and meet at the track. There, they would walk, jog or run for about a half-hour before the school day began.

| The children met Tuesdays and Thursdays in three sessions throughout the school year. The first session drew about 90 children. For the second session, the group swelled to 130 kids. By the spring session, more than 150 of the 435 students at the school were participating, along with several teachers and staff members.

| "I heard somewhere that Dutchess County was the number-one county in the state for childhood obesity," Kurdziel said. "I wanted to start this program to get kids moving, so our kids don't start having adult problems like diabetes."

| Mission accomplished.

| By the school year's end, West Road students - the Arlington district school has third-, fourth- and fifth-grade classes - had logged more than 5,000 miles on the school's one-third mile track.

| Kurdziel started the program during the second week of September last year, with full support of school Principal Heather Ogborn. "She was so supportive of the idea," Kurdziel said, "and the amazing thing was that the parents were too. They got their kids to school early and we hit the ground running with it."

| The program ended with a flourish in the spring. During the final session, the fourth-grade class alone logged more than 2,000 miles. Each child would get a commemorative "foot" for every nine laps (three miles) they would complete. Friendly rivalries about how many "feet" they would collect ensued.

| "So many kids wanted to join by the end of last year," Kurdziel said. "I'm excited for this year. We're hoping to increase it to three days per week."

| Kurdziel's enthusiasm for this topic has extended beyond the track. She was able to secure snowshoes and pedometers from the Dutchess County Department of Health, as a way to keep the program going strong through the winter months. The program moved inside for some of that time, and when conditions allowed, children snowshoed before school as well.

| In addition, at Kurdziel's urging, the school cafeteria began to offer skim milk and put the spotlight on different fruits and vegetables in an effort to get children to make healthier food choices. "The state health department cited West Road as a success story," she said. "That was a big deal to us."

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She's also spearheading an effort to get the track paved or finished with a rubberized surface. She noted that nearby Dutchess Quarry donated 7,500 yards of pea stone, which can be used as a under-surface before the track is finished with a top coat of material.

Kurdziel, who coaches Pleasant Valley town youth sports, noted that the West Road school is a hub for youth sports activities on the evenings and weekends, and as a result the old dirt track gets a lot of use during those times.

The local running community has done its share to encourage our children to get a move on.

Every Mid-Hudson Road Runners Club race has a children's dash event of some sort.

The club's Summer Twilight Track Series offers several events for children, getting them introduced to the track.

And the upcoming Dutchess County Classic features a Kids Classic that drew more than 100 entries last year.

Classic race director Keith Axelrod said he was hoping to attract more than 200 kids to the race this year. Perhaps he could tap into this burgeoning group of on-the-move elementary school kids to boost race number this year.

Either way, let's keep our kids moving this school year, and have them start 2007-2008 on the right foot by completing the Kids Classic 1-mile race.

Classic volunteers needed

Dutchess County Classic race director Keith Axelrod noted last week that the volunteer support for the Sept. 16 race has been strong. But he also pointed out that traffic volunteers are still needed for the Classic.

This is a vital function in keeping the Classic a safe and successful local running event. The half-marathon and marathon races both run through three towns - Wappinger, East Fishkill and LaGrange - on busy main roads. Although it is a Sunday morning and traffic is not as heavy, for the runners' safety all intersections and turns need to be manned by volunteers.

Anyone interested in helping out should call Axelrod at 914-456-0708.