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Mentored by Tufts medical students, local high schoolers study classmates' health

Posted by Matt Rocheleau January 28, 2013 12:11 PM

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(Tufts University School of Medicine)

A group photo of some of the English High School "health investigators" and their Tufts University medical school student mentors. The high schoolers in the photo are the six who presented the research findings on Wednesday: Carla Soares, Sheltzie Flores, Keysa Salado, Massiel Ramirez Cuello, Diosaris Lorenzo, and Jonathan Almanzar Fermin.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

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Students from English School in Jamaica Plain, mentored by Tufts University medical students, recently unveiled findings of a two-month long research effort into the health needs of their school community.

University officials noted that the research was informal, conducted by the high school students and only included a small sample of students, between 25 and 85 classmates depending on the survey.

The results showed that nearly two-thirds of the students surveyed said they are worried about getting diabetes in the future; about one in every four students surveyed said they eat four or more candy bars per week; about half said they drink, on average two or more cans of soda per day; and about two-thirds of surveyed students said they read and understand nutrition labels, officials said.

The surveys found that nearly two-thirds of EHS students surveyed exercise three or more days per week for 30 minutes or more.

Among those who said they have tried to lose weight, 41 percent exercised as part of their regimen, while 30 percent limited their food intake. Among those who said they have not tried losing weight, 43 percent said they had not tried because they are happy with their weight.

About one in every four students surveyed said they do not think that they gain weight when they eat junk food; more than half of the students surveyed believe that advertisements affect what they eat; about two-thirds of those surveyed said they are in front of a screen, watching television or playing video games, when they eat; more than half said they felt they eat healthier at home.


The teenaged “health investigators” presented those findings at the Tufts University School of Medicine on Wednesday.


The research efforts were coordinated through the Health Impact Partnership, a program that teams medical students from Tufts with high school students interested in public health, university officials said.

The program aims “to teach leadership and advocacy skills to at-risk youth through the lens of public health and medicine,” according to Tufts.

During the two-month long program, the medical school students asked the

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high school students which areas of health and medicine they wanted to learn about and then helped the teenagers design surveys and analyze the resulting data in an effort to assess the health needs of their school and community.

The medical school students also assisted the high schoolers to find ways to address those needs, including by: serving healthy snacks to classmates, distributing a healthy foods cookbook that students from the high school created last year, showing fellow students clips of the movie "Super Size Me" and surveying them about whether the movie had changed has changed their perception of fast food.

On Wednesday, after presenting their research, the high school students met one-on-one with health care professionals – including a pediatrician, a nurse, a pharmacologist, nutrition engineer and a nutrition scientist – interviewing each about their jobs, officials said.

Next week, a new session of the Health Impact Partnership will begin at the high school. The students involved in most recent program will participate again, joined by fellow students who will be new to the program. The high schoolers will either choose to work on new projects or do additional work on the projects they just researched.

Last year, students from English High School, including six involved in the program's most recent run, researched nutritional habits, drug and alcohol use, and physical activity of their classmates, officials said.

Based on those findings, the students created the aforementioned health foods cookbook and distributed it to graduating seniors, developed a blog that their classmates could use to learn about new types of exercise and how to use gym equipment safely, and created a forum for their peers to get accurate information about alcohol use and safety.

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