

Big winners? Atlantic kids as faculty gets fit

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The faculty at Atlantic High School took a cue from reality television when, for one month, they competed in their own version of *The Biggest Loser*.

From Jan. 9 through Feb. 13, about half of the Delray Beach school faculty used pedometers to keep track of their daily activity. Like the popular TV show, the faculty members had weekly weigh-ins, but instead of doing them publicly on large digital scales, they were done in private.



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HealthCorps coordinator Colleen Sherk with Gloria Bluefer (left), a culinary and consumer science teacher at Atlantic High. Bluefer lost 7 percent of her body fat during the school's faculty competition. In the end, the faculty walked a total of around 15 million steps or 7,873 miles, and they lost 279 pounds or 201 percent of their body fat.

The competition was the brainchild of Colleen Sherk, the school's HealthCorps coordinator.

"The contest was more like the biggest winner," she said.

HealthCorps is a not-for-profit that works to curb child obesity through school-based health education and mentoring. The organization has established its program in 45 high schools, including four others in Palm Beach County. Each school has one HealthCorps coordinator.

Atlantic High Principal Kathleen Weigel said she is proud of what the faculty accomplished, and although the competition is over, she still keeps a pedometer attached to her at all times.

"Everybody got involved," she said. "It made us aware of what we do in a day. And it was fun."

Melanese Smith, the 11th-grade guidance counselor, was part of a team of three called Team Ex-MD's, a reference to all of them cutting McDonald's and other fast food out of their diets.

"I never ate healthy or exercised before this," she said. "But once I did, I started feeling better and had more energy."

Sherk knows how difficult it can be to get exercise while working in the classroom. Before becoming involved with HealthCorps, she taught fifth grade at Greenacres Elementary for three years.

She has seen how students look up to their teachers, so she assumed that by encouraging teachers to exercise first, the students would be more likely to follow.

Her assumption paid off. Since the faculty contest ended, she has handed out 200 pedometers to students, and she said she could have handed out more if she hadn't run out. She hopes to get a new batch of pedometers donated to the school soon.

In addition to the latest competition, Sherk has organized other events on campus. In the fall, more than 1,000 students attended a health fair with 25 vendors from the community. The fair was part of "Active Eagles Week," which included a strongest man/woman contest and a blood drive.

On a day-to-day basis, Sherk visits classrooms and talks to students about nutrition, exercise, stress management, self-esteem issues and other health-related topics.

"My main purpose is to be here for the students, but the job itself is so multi-faceted," she said. "I love it."

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