S.C. ‘FIGHT Club’ Members Lose Pounds and Gain Fitness, Fun and Camaraderie

**Issue:** School can be especially challenging for obese or overweight high school students, who make up nearly a third of the student population in the United States, according to 2014 statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Overweight adolescents are far more likely to be bullied and socially ostracized, which often leads to a vicious cycle of continued overeating to mask their depression, anxiety and emotional pain.

Schools rarely provide help for students dealing with weight issues, says Deborah Holcombe, SHAPE America member and physical education teacher to more than 1,800 students at James F. Byrnes High School in Duncan, S.C. A former college-level volleyball and softball coach, she was named national “Softball Coach of the Year” in 2005 and national “High School Teacher of the Year” finalist in 2009. Holcombe retired from her coaching duties in 2009 after her mother became ill. Away from her job, Holcombe immediately felt a void: “I missed helping students work together to achieve a common goal,” she says.

Brainstorming with a fellow teacher, Holcombe realized that her coaching skills could fill an important need beyond sports. “If high school students want to be active after school, their only choice is usually athletics — but many simply aren’t comfortable participating in sports with their highly skilled peers,” notes Holcombe. “Overweight students may have had particularly bad experiences in PE and grapple with a variety of emotional, social and physical issues. Many want social opportunities to make new friends and a place to interact with others their own age.”

**The Big Idea:** In the fall of 2010, Holcombe approached her school’s principal, Dr. Jeff Rogers, with an idea: create a non-threatening, inclusive, after-school program for students who want to get fit and lose weight.

Hoping to recruit 12 students that first year, Holcombe was astonished when 29 students, along with a few teachers, signed up for the new club. “Now I get 35 to 40 students and six or seven teachers, which is all I can handle,” she says.

**Implementation:** Before students can participate, they must get a physical examination and attend a parent-student meeting to help ensure their accountability. Attendance is mandatory unless there is an emergency.

Every Monday and Thursday from 3:45 to 5:15 p.m., the students and teachers meet in the weight room to socialize, stretch, participate in a group meeting, and rotate through the cardio and weight equipment to get a balanced fitness workout. Some days they head off-site to the local YMCA for yoga or aerobics classes or swimming lessons. When weather permits, they go to a local park to walk and play disc golf. Everyone trains for three 5K races — regardless of their abilities and fitness levels. “Some walk, some run and some do everything in between,” says Holcombe.
Each February, members of the FIGHT Club participate in the Lifepoint Organ and Tissue Donation 5k.

Each February, the group makes a trip to Charleston, S.C., for the Lifepoint Organ and Tissue Donation 5K, which necessitates an overnight stay. Although there is no school budget for the FIGHT Club or the field trip, Holcombe secures grant money from the Greater Greer Education Foundation and teacher donations each year, which the students augment by selling flowers at Christmas.

“We have 30 to 35 students participate and they generate about $2,500 to participate in the 5k race and support organ and tissue donation,” Holcombe says. “It motivates the students even more to help make a difference in people’s lives.” After the race they celebrate at a local bowling alley.

Any additional money raised from grants and sales goes to incentivize the members with FIGHT Club T-shirts, she says, adding, “It’s amazing what a T-shirt will do.”

Takeaway: By working together on their common goals of fitness and weight loss, the FIGHT Club members have become a family that includes students of multiple races and nationalities, as well as a range of academic abilities, from high achievers to those with special needs. “The fact that we can get teenagers and teachers to stay after school for an extra hour and a half speaks volumes,” Holcombe says. “They really like being there. Everyone gets along great and brings a positive attitude.”

The program has helped many students who are dealing with various physical and emotional issues, including cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, asthma, depression, and parents in hospice care. It is equally beneficial for students without disabilities, who witness first-hand the challenges those with disabilities face every day.

Holcombe had a student with cerebral palsy who successfully completed a 5K race in 1:09 (1 hour, 9 minutes). “When an able-bodied student starts complaining, I ask them, ‘Do you see others whining or being lazy? No, they persevere and work through their challenges — and so can you.’”

Results: The club’s supportive atmosphere encourages students to talk about their issues and empowers them to take charge of their diet and fitness, perhaps for the first time ever. Not everyone in the club needs to lose excess weight, but some have had dramatic results.

“One 10th-grade boy started at 305 pounds and was down to a healthy 180 pounds by graduation,” says Holcombe. “He went on to boot camp in the U.S. Army Reserve.” An 11th-grade girl also lost more than 115 pounds in the program. Holcombe arms the members with nutrition information and encourages them to drink water and eat a healthy breakfast — something she says many teens don’t do. Some members return after graduation to show her what they have been able to accomplish since high school — and to cheer on the others.

“A lot of kids have lost weight after they finished school because over time they saw the need to make changes in their lives and our program has planted hat seed of knowledge,” Holcombe says. “One former student even started a FIGHT Club for women in her community, and two other former members are creating a FIGHT Club at their university. Our program not only impacts the individual student but also their families and future generations.”

SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

- Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
- Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

Additional Resources

Links to more information about this program can be found at shapeamerica.org/casestudies.