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Raising Funds for Montana Schools with Student Health in Mind

There is no doubt that fundraising is a fiscal fact of life in Montana schools. For years, parents, students, and teachers have raised funds for special projects, such as trips, uniforms, and equipment. Increasingly, school groups are raising funds for more essential items like computers and books. At the same time, there is also increasing recognition that some food fundraisers - buckets of cookie dough and gigantic candy bars, for example - may not be consistent with the creation of healthy school environments.

“Across Montana, groups are realizing that healthy fundraisers can be a win-win-win,” says Aubree Durfey, Program Manager for Gallatin Valley Farm to School (www.gvfarmtoschool.org). “Most importantly, healthy fundraisers are a win because they raise monies that schools need for both necessities and special projects. They also help to send consistent messages about healthful eating and active lifestyles to students and families. And, finally, they can keep dollars in the local community rather than paying distant companies.”

Moving away from empty calorie fundraising is a focus in many prominent national programs and federal guidelines for schools. Requirements for healthy fundraising is part of USDA’s HealthierUS School Challenge awards (won by eight Montana schools) and the wellness policy mandates of the national 2010 Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, which reauthorized funding for school meal programs.

“Successful, healthy school fundraisers can take several different forms,” explains Molly Stenberg, RD (registered dietitian), co-chair of Montana Action for Healthy Kids. “A first step for some groups is to go from selling candy to selling non-food sales, like wrapping paper, flower plants, or items with a school logo. A more significant shift is to sell healthful food products, especially locally-grown and produced items that support local agriculture at the same time. Several Montana groups have also been very successful with activity-based fundraisers, such as walk-a-thons, jog-a-thons, and dance-a-thons, as well as celebrating Walk-to-School Week. Read-a-thons are another, more sedentary version on this theme.”

Stenberg believes that any school or community can successfully raise needed funds with kids’ health in mind. Here’s how some Montanans are creatively raising money and promoting health at the same time:

- **Montana Harvest Fundraiser:** 2011 marks the third year of this program in the Gallatin Valley, expanding into middle school and 4-H groups. Guide, templates, and other materials are available from Montana Team Nutrition online at <http://opi.mt.gov/Farm2SchoolFundRaising>.
- **Emily Dickinson School (Bozeman):** A 2010 PAC Fun Run raised over \$19,000 for computer equipment. Students got pledges for laps they ran/walked and the school devoted a day to active fun, class-by-class.
- **Locally-grown potato sales:** In Amsterdam, farmers donated potatoes and the school raised over \$700; in Whitefish, potatoes were grown in a community garden and sold to add fruits and veggies to school meals.
- **Billings:** On 9/11/11, Billings Catholics Schools raised funds with their first annual Running on Faith jog-a-thon. Highland School’s Walk-to-School-a-thon, sponsored by the PTSA, has raised thousands of dollars.

Past and current issues of Eat Right Montana’s monthly packets can be downloaded for free at www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrighthealthyfamilies.htm

FIT KIDS=HAPPY KIDS: Healthy Futures for Montanans 2011