

SPANing Program

Wickenburg Healthcare Alliance (WHA) has a mission to improve health and healthcare in rural communities throughout Arizona. One approach WHA has taken is with a program of health education through elementary schools at various locations in the State.

We have developed SPANing (Senior Physicians And Nurses, informing, nurturing, guiding), which is a statewide panel of medical professionals, retired or not, who recognize the need for improved health literacy among our children and their families. SPANing members and candidates enjoy meeting and having informal talks with youngsters in classrooms, their place of comfort.

Our pilot program at Congress Elementary School, in Congress, AZ has shown interest and enthusiasm for learning increased as the program progressed.

The main features of the program:

1. WHA approached the school administration and received their approval for the project.
2. A semi-retired physician member of WHA, Dr. Tom Matlock, met with the 5th grade class at the school, and spent an hour with them “de-mystifying” health and health care.
3. That class, with help from WHA, organized the school’s first health fair for all the students, K through 8, and the concept of student and school ownership of health education was realized.
4. WHA members wrote and published several textbooks on health, including a Primer (in English and Spanish) and a Nutrition Lesson book.
5. The WHA focus narrowed to the 6th grade students, who were given copies of our books, and two WHA members met with the class to demonstrate their use in hard copy and online.
6. Dr. Matlock, in a short session with the 6th graders and their teacher, introduced a topic for their specific attention and study (the first one was lungs and lung function).
7. After they were comfortable with the subject, the 6th grade students then mentored the 1st grade students, and then the 2nd grade students at the school about lungs and lung diseases.
8. The results were gratifying. It was a win-win situation, in which the younger students listened attentively to their older peers, who themselves developed knowledge of their subject they are not likely to forget.

This model can be duplicated easily in schools in large or small communities. It doesn’t increase the demand on the teacher’s already limited extra time. Once the students realize what they have and how far they can progress in health literacy, their teacher may need to offer only limited advice and encouragement. “Outside” involvement by a health care professional can be as little or as much as both parties need or want.

Keys to getting it started are:

1. Realization of the need by a school's administration
2. Providing the 'target class' with appropriate educational material, and explaining the program to its teacher
3. Initiating contact by a medical person with the students, in a get acquainted visit with an open agenda, ie, let the students talk about whatever is on their minds
4. Choose a specific topic, and the medical mentor will discuss it further with the class
5. When they are ready, arrange for mentoring sessions within the school, in which the targeted class teaches younger students.
6. Arrange to photograph or video record the mentoring activity, as all involved will enjoy watching it unfurl and see their own participation.
7. Take small steps, and expect success.

If you are a health professional interested in making a major contribution to your community, you are a SPANing candidate. You will find the amount of time required is small in comparison to the personal and community rewards achievable. For more information, contact us at:

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