

# Group tries to make mark on obesity, nutrition, fitness, health in Reading

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By [Matthew Nojiri](#)

READING, PA

## Reading Recreation Commission grant

**What:** A grant to support healthy food access outside of school and nutritional literacy from the National Recreation and Park Association.

**Amount:** \$32,000.

**Uses:** Increase the number of healthy meals for children through the Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Program; provide nutrition literacy to children; implement nutritional literacy standards that increase access to healthy foods and exercise; implement meal and program efficiencies that reduce costs, decrease food waste and create sustainable meal programs.

**Most U.S. kids:** Do not meet the recommendations for eating 2.5 to 6.5 cups of fruits and vegetables each day.

Do not eat the minimum recommended amounts of whole grains.

Eat more than the recommended maximum daily intake of sodium of 1,500 to 2,300 milligrams each day.

Empty calories from added sugars and solid fats contribute to 40 percent of daily calories for children between 2 and 18. About half of those empty calories come from soda, fruit drinks, dairy desserts, grain desserts, pizza and whole milk.

Adolescents drink more full-calorie soda per day than milk. Boys between 12 and 19 drink

about 22 ounces of full-calorie soda per day, more than twice their intake of milk. Girls drink an average of 14 ounces of full-calorie soda and only 6 ounces of milk.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Emily Lengel begins her class inside the Third and Spruce Recreation Center last week, and the 10-, 11- and 12-year-olds staring back at her are ready.

For six weeks, the Oley native has been a roving teacher in Reading, moving from playground to playground to explain the essentials of nutrition. She's covered everything from the basic food groups to the perils of cholesterol to the stunning nutritional facts on the back of the kids' favorite bodega treat.

This is the final lesson for the summer, and there's plenty to cover.

But first, she starts the class with a speed round.

"What makes up 60 percent of our body?" she asks.

The hands shoot up in the crowd of about 25.

"Water!"

"What should we not be drinking; because it has this in it; which will turn into this if your body can't use it?"

"Soda, sugar, fat," the kids say to each question.

"What are the two things in fruits and vegetables that we need?"

"Nutrients and vitamins!"

Lengel is the nutrition coordinator for the Reading Recreation Commission's new nutritional literacy summer program. This summer, she's taught nearly 360 kids between ages 6 and 12 about the essentials of good eating and good choices.

By all accounts, staff members say, the summer lessons have provided a great start as the recreation commission attempts to make its mark on obesity, nutrition, fitness and health in the city.

Back in the class, the kids have aced the final speed quiz in three minutes, and the rest of the lesson is underway.

"You have learned a lot this summer and have done such a great job remembering," she tells the kids, "and today brings it all together."

## **Federal grant project**

The recreation commission started the nutrition program this summer after receiving a \$32,000 federal grant from the National Recreation and Park Association. The grant supports time outside of the school year for children to access healthy food and to learn about nutrition, said Camille F. Stock, chief development officer for the Reading Recreation Commission.

Adult obesity in Berks County has typically hovered around 30 percent, and it's a particularly big concern in Reading, Stock said.

"We recognize the fact that obesity is a huge problem," she said. "We're trying to change that in little bits and pieces. We're teaching kids how important it is to eat well."

Some of the funding will be used on a new program to teach parents about healthy food shopping and healthy recipes on a budget.

The federal grant supported the purchase of a van for delivery of the meals and snacks the commission provides at all its playgrounds and sites. The recreation commission also delivers daily meals to six schools in the Reading School District during the school year.

It's all about showing a clear commitment to a culture of health in Reading, Stock said.

"One of the reasons why I love working here is we're always on the cutting edge of making a difference," she said. "It's stuff like this that can make a difference."

## **Nutrition labels, food and Takis**

"Is popcorn healthy?" Lengel asks the class last week.

The answers in the crowd are mixed.

"It's like everything," she said. "If I make popcorn at home and don't coat it in butter and salt, it's pretty healthy. If I go to the IMAX and buy a jumbo tub and slather it with butter and cheese and eat the entire tub, is it going to be healthy?"

It's a lot to ask a crowd of kids on summer break to stay locked in on nutrition for an hour, but this class does pretty well.

"One, two, three, eyes on me," Lengel says to get their attention back a few times.

"One, two, eyes on you," they respond.

Tyshon Harris, 11, of Reading said he's learned a lot about the food he likes to eat.

"We've been learning about eating healthy, vitamins, vegetables," he said.

A big shock to the class came when they learned Takis, a favorite corn chip found in bodegas, had four servings in a bag. That means the bag has about 600 calories in it, Lengel noted.

"Hear me in your head saying, 'Don't pick up the Takis,' " she said, laughing.

At the end of class, the kids get to try a healthy treat and receive a recipe to take home. Today's offering is a wheat quesadilla with peanut butter, banana and chocolate chips.

Over the summer, the class has tried lentil tacos, learned about fruit-infused water and witnessed a demonstration about how cholesterol clogs arteries. Some even remembered the difference between refined and whole grains.

Lengel took a moment to assess the six-week program as another group of kids ages 6 through 9 stepped into the room.

"Knowing that I'm influencing some kids and impacting the city, even on a small scale, makes it so worth it," she said. "If one kid chooses water over soda at a birthday party, or one kid chooses baked chips instead of Takis at a bodega, then I've done my job."

Contact Matthew Nojiri: 610-371-5062 or [mnojiri@readingeagle.com](mailto:mnojiri@readingeagle.com)

Photo Gallery- Reading Eagle: Harold Hoch



**Reading Eagle: Harold Hoch** | Tyshan Harris, 11, of Reading answers a question about nutritional labeling on a food package.



**Reading Eagle: Harold Hoch** | Emily Lengel, nutrition coordinator for the Reading Recreation Commission, instructs a class during a session of the summer nutritional literacy program at the Third and Spruce Recreation Center.



**Reading Eagle: Harold Hoch** | Tyshan Harris, 11, of Reading, center, prepares to answer a question about nutritional labeling on a food package.



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**Reading Eagle: Harold Hoch** | Emily Lengel, nutrition coordinator for the Reading Recreation Commission, instructs a session of the summer nutritional literacy program at the Third and Spruce Recreation Center.



**Reading Eagle: Harold Hoch** | Talisha Rodriguez, 12, of Muhlenberg Township, left, and Jaden Serrano, 10, of Reading are eager to answer a question from Emily Lengel, nutrition coordinator for the Reading Recreation Commission.