

Springing into fitness

By Renee Newberry

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Every day, Holly and Owen Becker, 9 and 7 years old, respectively, arrive home from the Immaculate Conception School in Towson and teach their 4-year-old sister, Brynn, an exercise class.

"I have a 4-year-old doing jumping jacks," said their mother, Blandy Becker, who said Holly and Owen debate over who's going to lead the exercise class. "It's been great. The best part is my son is asking for vegetables and chicken."

As if this were not enough, Becker said the children's physical education teacher, Kimberly Belmore, has commented on their ability to perform squats correctly.

The kids' motivation is Immaculate Conception's Fitness Challenge, launched by Belmore at the beginning of February. Belmore said faculty, student and parent participants - and even some Immaculate Conception Church parishioners - "earn points for eating healthy, drinking eight eight-ounce glasses of water a day, physical activity for 30 minutes or more and walking."

One mother, Stephanie Moore, said her children do relay races in their backyard as part of the challenge.

"The kids come home, and right away, they say, 'OK, we need to get 30 minutes of exercise in,'" said Moore of her 8-year-old son Jonathan and 6-year-old daughter Samantha. "They look forward to doing it."

Moore is pleased with their enthusiasm - Samantha can be difficult to engage in exercise, she said - and is making her own gains from the challenge. "I meet with another mom. She gives me nutritional tips. I'll give her exercise tips," the mother

said, adding it's not about being skinny but healthy.

Immaculate Conception first grade teacher Melanie Bisesi said she's "learning how to be a smart eater: Eat small, but eat a lot of meals."

Bisesi has lost 20 pounds since the beginning of the year. "It's just about being and acting healthy," she said, "not just sitting on the bench but being active with the kids, playing with the them."

The teacher has seen a lot of enthusiasm from students. "I see kids running around the gym and ask them why, and they say it's for the fitness challenge," she explained. "Most kids who are doing it are doing it with their family."

Bisesi said families are engaging in healthy eating, bike rides and mile walks, among other activities. "They don't know if they're capable of doing it and, because of the challenge, they're putting themselves out there a little more and finding they can do this."

Belmore said participants receive five extra points for participating in a team challenge at the end of each month. February's team challenge was, tentatively, a boot camp.

"The top prize is reaching your goal," said Belmore.

This incentive seems to be working, as participants nudge each other to stay the course. "It's nice to have group support," said assistant principal Debbie Thomas, adding she's lost weight and feels better. "I'm more motivated by a group than I would be by myself."

Belmore is making available plenty of opportunities for participants to get in shape if they don't have a plan of their own. Thomas said every Monday and Wednesday, Belmore holds a one-hour, after-school exercise class for teachers, which has included aerobics, weight training, and yoga.

"I'll have motivational things on the Web," said Belmore, who has a personal trainer degree and enjoys sharing her knowledge. "I'll let (participants) know if someone is doing P90X. You do what's working for you, and for those who don't (have a plan),

I'll give a workout program."

Becker, who helped Belmore in bouncing ideas for the challenge off of different parents, said the goal was "trying to get everybody involved, not just the kids."

The mother said another mom, who is a certified yoga instructor, offers a yoga class to parents from 1:30-2:30 in the school while they would otherwise be sitting in their cars waiting to pick up their children.

She said, "There are really high, steep stairs from the church parking lot to the playing field. Parents will run the stairs and run the field (while they wait to pick up their kids)"

Thomas said parents are posting their activities online and earning points; Belmore said the kids are keeping logs.

The official end date for the challenge is May 11, the day of the annual Race for Education, a one-mile walk/run in which students participate.

But Belmore doesn't really see an end to this challenge, calling it ongoing.

"That's the nice part about it," said Moore, who explained she is "finding ways to ... take care of myself, too."