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By RACHEL COLEMAN

Leader & Times

The after school hours mean snack time for most students — and snack time means “soda and hot Cheetos, things like that,” says Sarah Foreman, director of the Liberal Area Coalition for Families. “That’s the typical favorite.”

To coax children into considering something healthier, the LACF sponsored a taste-testing session late last month at the Blue Bonnet Park Youth Center. Using money from a “Healthy Communities” grant from the Kansas Health Foundation, Foreman and nutritionist Susan Lukwago of the Seward County Health Department set up a snack buffet for students.

“This is our inaugural event,” Foreman said. “Our purpose is to try to help the recreation center identify, with kids’ input, healthier choices they might offer. We wanted the kids’ input because they’re the consumers here.”

As children meandered into the youth center, Foreman invited them to eat at the snack buffet.

“We’re taste-testing,” Foreman told the elementary- and intermediate-school children. “Come and eat, and put a sticker on your four favorite snacks.”

A wall display with colorful posters listed items of varying nutritional value, from candy bars to broccoli. After they’d eaten, students were asked to place four stickers on their favorite foods.

First, though, students loaded their plates with an array of snack foods: fresh vegetables and ranch dip, chips and salsa, yogurt with strawberries and blackberries. Foreman and Lukwago also offered trail mix with dried fruit, string cheese and crackers with cheese.

At one of the center’s round tables, a group of boys compared notes on the snack selection.

“Chips and salsa, that’s my favorite,” said Kobe Martinez. His friend George Ramos loaded up on carrots and broccoli with ranch dressing.

“I like salad,” Ramos said. “It’s healthy.”

Meanwhile, Anthony Godina held out for his fast food favorites.

“Hamburgers are my favorite,” he said. “Hamburgers.”

Foreman was pleased to see so many students “at least trying healthy snacks,” she said. “We listed other items like candy bars and Takis on the posters, and some of the kids are selecting those as favorites, even though we’re not serving those items. But they’re actually eating the healthier foods we served.”

“I can’t believe it, but I’m saying broccoli is one of my favorites,” marveled Patricia Flores. “I like cheese, yogurt, trail mix, too.”

“I vote candy bars,” said Harley Ewalt.

Lukwago, who manned the veggie station, noted that she wasn’t on a mission to take away the much-loved candy bar.

“That’s absolutely not the object here,” she said. “What we do hope to do is lower the percentage of snacks that don’t meet nutritional standards.” Lukwago said she’d be thrilled if the grant-funded project met the modest goal of the recreation center offering 30 percent healthy to 70 percent not-so-healthy snacks.

Parent Loreda Aguilar was thrilled to find the buffet up and running.

“This is just what we needed,” she said. The family had returned from a doctor visit earlier that day, “and the doctor was clear that we need to reduce the fatty options for one of my children. When I talked to my son, the first word he used was ‘diet,’ but I told him it’s not like that. We can set small goals to reduce his blood pressure, protect him from diabetes. We can make the same food, but we’ll have to learn how to do it different — broil the hamburgers instead of frying them.”

“You are the reason I do what I do,” exclaimed Lukwago.

“Yeah, we have to change our thinking about a lot of the ways we eat, and this helps,” said Aguilar.

Lukwago and Foreman plan a second session, offering students options for beverages. With enough feedback from the youth, they are hopeful the recreation center, like the Aguilar family, will learn to make small changes that add up to better health.

Foreman, too, is hopeful the project will succeed.

“All the kids were willing to try everything,” she said. “They pretty much cleaned us out in 30 minutes. That seems like a good sign.”

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