ICeNSA, United Way tackle childhood obesity

Connecting children with a wellness platform

BY CAROL C. BRADLEY, NDWORKS

ICeNSA, the Interdisciplinary Center for Network Science and Applications, directed by Nitesh Chawla, the Frank Freimann Collegiate Associate Professor in computer science and engineering, is making transformative advances in personalized health care and wellness by connecting data, computing, social networks, and people. The center’s faculty, staff and students are collaborating with local, state and regional health care providers, a regional health information exchange and community organizations such as United Way in the health and wellness research initiative—with a focus on patient-centered outcomes and wellness, says Chawla.

“We aim to increase the quality and years of life in the overall population, reduce cost, and eliminate health disparities by race, ethnicity and income.”

ICeNSA scientists are currently collaborating on a United Way initiative in St. Joseph County on childhood obesity, nutrition and academic performance, focusing on the research and deployment of a Web-based health and wellness platform to help children set goals, eat healthy food and lose weight. The project is supported by a United Way Foundation grant, with funds earmarked to specifically address the need in the community for improving childhood nutrition and reduce obesity.

It’s a component of a larger socio-ecological model, with a goal of creating large-scale social change, says Waldo Mikels-Carrasco, the community health research program manager at ICeNSA. Childhood obesity is a national issue, with approximately 17 percent (12.5 million) children and adolescents classified as obese. Nationally, one in seven low-income preschool-age children are obese. At the same time, adequate nutrition continues to be a problem. Childhood hunger and childhood obesity both have documented effects on academic performance.

Within the South Bend Community School Corporation alone, SBSCS statistics indicate that the percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches at the primary level ranges from 64 to 96 percent; at the intermediate level from 40 to 89 percent; and at the high school level 55 to 79 percent. Students qualify for the USDA school lunch program based on household size and income eligibility. The Food Bank of Northern Indiana also reports that 41 percent of households receiving food have children under 18, with 79 percent of the households experiencing food insecurity.

The current project, Creating Large-Scale Social Change in Childhood Obesity & Academic Performance: A collective impact approach for St. Joseph County, acknowledges that no single community organization can improve the health of families living at or below the poverty level. ICeNSA’s contribution to the collaboration is a Web-based health and wellness platform at the school or school system level that has the components to engage and empower healthy behaviors. The program can connect all students, allow them to set individual goals, and, ideally, encourage them to want to move to the next healthier level.

Students’ BMI (body mass index) numbers will be tracked for a year. With the secured and personalized website, students will be able to set individual goals and have the support of peers—and hopefully choose to move to the next healthier level.

The program will be piloted at the South Bend Career Academy, where every student has a tablet. The program, Mikels-Carrasco notes, can also connect to a Fitbit or other digital trackers. Encouraging healthy eating and exercise has dramatic impact, he says. “Possibly the greatest asset of Notre Dame and its employees is that both are ready to serve and build their community whenever there is a need.”

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Students can also be given a “Prescription to Play,” which allows them free access to fitness programs at the Kroc Center and the YWCA.

With a collective impact approach, other programs such as the USDA Farm to School project (fns.usda.gov) encompassing efforts that range from school gardening, farm visits and culinary classes to bringing locally or regionally sourced foods to school cafeterias, can also become a part of the overall program.

“Theres also an effort to open schools after hours, to encourage classes and family fitness activities,” Coach Muffet McGraw says.

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