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# WES earns Blue Zones worksite certification, WMS school certification

By Special to West Hawaii Today | Monday, December 3, 2018, 12:35 a.m.

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Waimea Elementary teachers and staff members Lia Shaw, Catherine Jones, Pam Walton, Erin Henderson and Megan Brady comprise a 10- Waimea Middle School students prepare for week Blue Zones walking moai. (COURTESY PHOTO/WES)

WAIMEA — In the last month, Waimea Elementary School (WES) and Waimea Middle School (WMS) have had two big accomplishments to celebrate: WES became a Blue Zones Project Approved worksite, and WMS achieved Blue Zones Project school approval.

Brought to Hawaii through an innovative sponsorship by HMSA, Blue Zones Project is a community-led, well-being improvement initiative designed to make healthy choices easier through permanent changes to lifestyle, environment, policy and social networks. Since selected in 2015, more than 6,800 North Hawaii residents have been involved in the Blue Zones Project.

WES completed their school approval, which focused on healthy changes to the campus, back in March. To continue their wellness initiatives, the elementary school wanted to further impact the well-being of their teachers and staff. Led by kindergarten teacher Cheryl Gruver, walking moais — groups of school staff members — were formed to walk together for 10 weeks. Personality assessments, Wednesday salad bar lunches and other wellness supports were also implemented.

“The decision to commit to the worksite pledge was an easy one because the overall school culture has changed towards healthier lifestyles with our previous school pledge process,” remarked Scott Tamura, WES’ principal.

Earlier this year, WMS launched wellness programs under the direction of the new Principal Janice English.

“We are focused on individual student academic growth and health wellness. We want our students to know we genuinely care about their well-being ... we are all family,” she said.

WMS achieved Blue Zones Project Approved school status in November. Some of the wellness programs that support students’ success include volunteering, gardening, wellness fundraising, professional development trainings, cultural protocols and mentoring. In addition, the school’s ongoing Mala’ai Garden provides hands-on learning in growing and preparing healthy foods and practicing environmental and cultural stewardship.

What most may not know is that WMS eighth grade leadership students support a campus snack shop and have added healthy snacks to students — free to the majority of the student body. Snacks have included whole wheat wraps and fruit-yogurt-granola bowls. Students who participate in the snack shop attendance reward receive community service credits that assist them with graduation requirements.

Sixth graders learn about fruits and vegetables each week as part of the USDA’s national Fresh Fruit &Vegetables Program. And most recently, WMS students got to experience hands-on educational activities to better understand the negative effects of vaping. Both of these wellness programs support the Blue Zones Project goals of teaching students how to lead longer, happier lives.

WES and WMS are among five Blue Zones Approved schools in North Hawaii out of a total of 20 schools on Hawaii Island. WES is the third approved school and worksite on the Big Island. Nine additional worksites have been approved in North Hawaii.

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