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# WES becomes North Hawaii's second Blue Zones Project Approved public school

By Landry Fuller Special to West Hawaii Today | Monday, May 14, 2018, 12:40 a.m.

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Students participate in a hula class led by school's Kumu Liana that day. (LANDRY FULLER/SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY)



Students see how far they can jump playing a game at the school's Blue Zones Approved. (LANDRY FULLER/SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY)

WAIMEA — “Hard work pays off” are words students often hear this time of year at graduation ceremonies.

But Wednesday, Waimea Elementary School teachers and staff received such congratulations at a Blue Zones Approved celebratory event after working nearly three years to earn the coveted distinction.

Since applying in 2015, staff members have made 15 policy changes and implemented 10 new programs to become Blue Zones Approved.

"It was about changing the mentality of people, and finding small things and ways to be healthier," WES Principal Scott Tamura said. "It's like not saying you're going on a diet, but changing your lifestyle."

Teachers now encourage students to bring healthy snacks to school, staff participates in a salad bar once a week and students take part in the Walking School Bus initiative weekly.

FoodCorp member La'akea Kaufman was instrumental in bringing the school to the finish line this year, supporting the teachers' Health & Wellness Committee.

"I started working on the initiative for Waimea Elementary in August. A lot of it was just crossing the t's and dotting the i's," she said.

"Teachers were doing things they didn't realize qualified as health initiatives, such as teaching MyPlate lessons to students or making homemade butter in the classroom that taught kids about nutrition and where their food comes from."

Other changes Kaufman helped make on campus included removing the teachers' soda vending machine and serving exclusively healthy meals for the school's ohana nights and family gatherings.

"Our largest one this year served over 400 meals — a major push to serve healthy nourishing foods to our families during the Blue Zones transition," she said. "In the kitchen it was just making a suggestion and the staff taking and running with it. It's been really inspiring."

Walking Warrior, a weekly Blue Zones initiative launched in January by teacher Pam Walton, has participating staff record the number of steps they take daily. Whoever walks the most that week wins a gift card.

"I've been exercising, so I wanted to get it out there to our staff to see if there was anyone else who wanted to start getting healthy, since we were becoming Blue Zones Approved," she said. "They've been having fun and we're gonna do it again next year."

In April, educational assistant Vilma Afaga took first place with 955,451 steps or 424 miles. Fourth-grade teacher Susan Ho came in second with 380,762 steps or 155 miles and Tania Opamin, who oversees the PTSO, walked 135 miles for third place.

"I always wear my Fitbit and it records the steps for me," Ho said. "It motivated me to do an extra round. It's a friendly competition among the other staff, which made it fun."

For Opamin, 348,816 steps came with benefits.

"I've been trying to walk every day to be healthier. It's mind clearing for me," she said. "During that week I walked 24,000 steps in one day during a big event we were hosting, and prepping the day before with 20,000 steps on campus alone."

At Wednesday's three-hour event in Waimea School Cafeteria, students and teachers spent the afternoon trying their hand at yoga, hula, riding a Blue Zones bike and savoring healthy local food samples while the Waimea Cowboys cheerleading squad put on multiple performances.

KTA, Child & Family Services, North Hawaii Community Hospital, Hawaii State Department of Health, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hawaii Island, St. James Church Community Meal Ministry, AYSO, Five Mountains Fitness, Hamakua Harvest and Waimea Yoga manned health-related booths.

"It's not Waimea Elementary's Blue Zones project, but a North Hawaii community project," Tamura said. "It's one step further along in our whole community becoming Blue Zones Approved."

WES is the second public school in North Hawaii to attain this distinction. Kohala Elementary became Blue Zones approved in April 2017. Blue Zones Project North Hawaii originally launched in October 2015.

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