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MEDIA RELEASE

Pioneering *Fresh Frenzy* program set to revive healthy eating habits in Mid Murray schools

Students in Mid Murray schools will begin a pioneering new nutrition program this term, designed to promote “wrapper free” lunchbox choices and encourage children into lifelong healthy eating habits.

The innovative four-week program, *Fresh Frenzy*, is being rolled out across upper primary age children in Mid Murray schools in mid-February after a successful pilot program at Truro last year.

Designed by Mid Murray Council’s Obesity Prevention and Lifestyle (OPAL) Program Manager Amy Loechel, in conjunction with local dietitian Bianca Gazzola, the program is timely, after recent studies have shown more than 1 in 4 Australian children are classed as overweight or obese.

Ms Loechel said the program was designed to promote positive change in the mindsets of children.

“We want to empower students to become role models for promoting healthy eating in their school and improve healthy eating attitude, knowledge and behaviour,” she says.

Based on data compiled from surveying over 350 children, parents and school staff in the Mid Murray region, Ms Gazzola says the survey results delivered strong insights, and also some unsavoury facts about the types of food children were consuming on a daily basis.

“The statistics showed that while schools are doing really well in increasing water consumption, we found that packaged, unhealthy foods, or “wrapper foods” that are high in sugar, salt and fat are a big issue in the average lunchbox,” she says. “We also discovered that many of the students simply did not understand the old “go for two fruit and five vegetables a day” dietary recommendation.”

To engage and guide students into healthy eating habits, Ms Loechel says the program was designed to be interactive and fun and also get families and classmates involved.

“We ask the children to collect their food wrappers for a week so they get to see a visual picture of the types of foods they are eating,” she says.

“Kids get to set their own individual goals in regards to healthy choices and they also write a letter to their parents about what they are trying to achieve.”

Ms Loechel says the kid-friendly program made it simpler for young children to understand about basic food preparation, serving sizes and even how to interpret food labels for health information.

At the end of the program, the students are encouraged to get hands-on with their food, indulging in a taste test session and sharing videos designed to reflect what they've learned, with often hilarious results.

"During the pilot program, we had some kids perform a rap song about the benefits of fruit and veg. That was great to see and showed the message was really sinking in," Ms Loechel says.

"All the junior primary students are also invited along to view the video and try the healthy food options. The feedback has been really positive so far and we believe this is because we're using strategies which the children themselves have told us they enjoy."

In partnership with local schools, Ms Loechel said the program aimed to equip students with the skills and knowledge to make healthy choices, a theme which would hopefully resonate throughout their lives and result in healthy behaviour change.

"It's a great program that we're very proud of. If we can create some generational change, maybe in years to come we will have beaten the current overweight and obesity issue. That will be amazing," she says.

The program will undergo evaluation to determine the reach and impacts made towards healthy eating in the region.

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