

[Close Window](#)[Send To Printer](#)

Article Launched: 5/11/2006 12:00 AM

Principal makes a healthy difference

BY DENNIS McCARTHY, Columnist
LA Daily News

Leslie Wise shook her head as she read through the 1971 report on obesity among developmentally disabled high school students.

The principal at the Diane S. Leichman Special Education Center realized that not much had changed in the 35 years since the school's former physical education teacher wrote the report for his master's thesis.

And it could be worse, with more junk food on the market these days and fewer stay-at-home moms with time to regularly prepare healthy meals for their kids.

Plus, many of the high school's 240 students with Down syndrome or autism lead sedentary lives, Wise knew, unable to compete in sports or run around with the other neighborhood kids after school.

And, yes, Wise thought, food was still being used as a reward for good behavior. How crazy is that?

She knew she couldn't change the world when she arrived as principal seven years ago, but she sure could change what was going at Leichman itself.

The Los Angeles Unified School District set the menu for what hot lunches it provided the school, often pizzas, tacos and burritos.

But Wise found money in the budget to make sure the students also had a choice of salads and sandwiches made with wheat bread. A walking track was also added around the area where the kids ate lunch.

"We embarked on a five-year, healthy-living program, and this is the piece de resistance," Wise said Wednesday, walking into the campus fitness center being dedicated today.

It's filled with state-of-the-art weight-training and fitness equipment, including exercise bikes hooked up to plasma-screen TVs that show movies and video games.

When the pedaling stops, so does the movie or video. If you think that's kind of cruel for these kids, think again, their parents say. They love the idea.

Marie Armenta's 20-year-old daughter, Angela, who has Down syndrome, was smiling and pedaling away Wednesday, enjoying a movie and getting a workout.

"It's a great idea that helps give the kids the motivation to keep going," Armenta says. "That's important because a lot of what Angela does she learns by mimicking her peers."

Would you want your kid mimicking friends riding an exercise bike or eating a slice of pizza? she asks.

"Angela's always had weight problems, and this, along with the diet changes we've made at home, will make an incredible change in her life."

Susan Larkin, whose 16-year-old son, Michael, is autistic, concurs.

"It's tough to get Michael to do anything physical. But once he got on that exercise bike and saw the video game playing, it was hard to get him off," she said.

The fitness center was funded by a \$50,000 grant from the Simon Foundation, which is headed by businessman and former

gubernatorial candidate Bill Simon and his wife, Cindy. They have a teenage son with a developmental disability.

Their foundation has built fitness centers at 30 Los Angeles high schools, including four for special-needs kids.

"I admit having a soft spot for special-education schools," Cindy Simon said Wednesday.

"These kids are entitled to the same fitness equipment and supplies every high school in Los Angeles should have, and we're trying to give it to them."

The next stop on Leichman High's five-year healthy-living plan is to provide nutritional programs for parents, and keep the center open at night so parents can drop by to watch a movie and exercise with their kids.

Principal Wise figures that's a better reward for good behavior than food.

"Years from now, I don't want some high school principal picking up an old report on childhood obesity, and thinking that nothing's changed," she said.

Dennis McCarthy's column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday.

dennis.mccarthy@dailynews.com

(818) 713-3749