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Project 18 looks to educate, encourage youths to be healthy

By DeAntae Prince
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Kids dressed in Ball State football jerseys rounded helmets during a relay Monday while their classmates did karaoke and high kicks across the Christel House Academy gymnasium.

The frenzy of activity was all part of Project 18, a new statewide campaign to battle childhood obesity.

Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning helped launch the effort, encouraging about 100 Christel House students to keep active and eat healthy.

"When I drive home from practice, which is kind of that after-school time, I don't see many kids in their backyards, playing," Manning said. "We're trying to encourage these kids to get outside and get active."

The 18-week effort consists of a public awareness campaign that features Manning, eating advisories promoted at Marsh Supermarkets and an exercise curriculum.

Manning, Peyton Manning Children's Hospital at St. Vincent and Ball State University worked to create the campaign that zeroes in on third- to fifth-graders in hopes of preventing bad eating habits from developing.

"Almost a third of our youth are not getting the right start," said Dr. Judy Moore, commissioner of the Indiana State Department of Health. "They already are setting up the potential for chronic disease that they'll have to deal with very young in life."

The idea, Christel House Principal Carey Dahncke said, is to promote positive living over an extended period. "What we're trying to do is change lifestyle habits," he said. "You can't do that with a one-shot initiative. It's got to be long and ongoing."

The project's phases include physical activities and healthy food alternatives for children.

Marsh Supermarkets' Down the Aisle program will stamp Peyton-approved foods. Project 18 walks will take place at every St. Vincent location, and Project 18 school programs will provide a health curriculum to students.



Star-struck: Anahi Murillo, 8, Hersheloa Griffin, 9, and DiAira Jones, 10, didn't know what to say when Peyton Manning asked how they were doing. Manning spoke to kids Monday at the Christel House Academy.

Christel DeHaan, founder of Christel House International, said parent participation is key because young children don't dictate their own eating habits.

"It's critical for children to know what are good decisions in the future, but that it also spills into the home," she said. Stephanie Kerner, a Ball State nursing student, was among an 11-person team that helped create the school curriculum and suggest the Peyton-approved foods. Manning, she said, will bolster the program's credibility.

"Kids at this age have a lot of influences," she said. "Having Peyton Manning being a big symbol of this project, they will listen, actually go to the Web site and use the materials there."

Manning pointed out that youngsters today face numerous distractions, such as video games and other electronics, but he said early education is most critical in the fight against child obesity.

"It's important that these children learn the right habits at this young age," Manning said, "so they will be healthy and be more active as they pursue their dreams and goals."