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**INNOVATIVE CHARTER SCHOOL IN CHICAGO SHARES ITS SECRETS OF
SUCCESS IN FIGHTING CHILDHOOD OBESITY**

Pioneering new program supported by Mars, Incorporated allows teachers nationwide to peek inside the classroom and cafeteria to duplicate the proven techniques and tools

CHICAGO, IL — Schools are increasingly under pressure to be part of the solution to stem soaring childhood obesity rates. But thanks to a pioneering new program, educators nationwide can learn lessons from an innovative charter school in Chicago that’s been breaking new ground in the fight for the health and wellness of America’s children.

A first-of-its-kind web-based community will allow schools throughout the country to adapt the techniques and tools used at Namaste, a small start-up charter school that was originally conceived to address the problem of childhood obesity, and to share the programs that are working at their own schools. Namaste is located in a Chicago neighborhood dominated by minority students – where obesity rates are three to four times the national average.

Made possible by an educational grant from Mars, Incorporated, the “Namaste Shares!” program (www.NamasteShares.org) will showcase the school’s groundbreaking approach that has attracted the interest of administrators, teachers, parents and healthcare professionals nationwide.

“Our phones have been literally ringing off the hook since we opened our doors two years ago and it’s been so difficult to keep up with all the requests to learn more about our unique approach,” said Namaste cofounder and principal Allison Slade. “We think this is the ideal answer to help other schools adapt our philosophy, curriculum and activities that have been so successful for us.”

There’s been a tremendous demand for school-based solutions and the urgency has never been greater. About one out of three children in this country is overweight or on the brink of becoming so. This translates to a three-fold increase in the last thirty years.

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“We think it’s extremely important to share these best practices with other schools and encourage teachers to begin discussing how best to promote healthy habits in the classroom,” said Marlene Machut, who heads up health, science and nutrition communications for Mars, Incorporated. “Namaste Shares! provides a model for school-based health interventions, which can get us one step closer in addressing the epidemic.”

With its name derived from a common yoga term that is Hindu for “my inner light salutes your inner light,” Namaste was conceived to address two of the most difficult educational and public health issues facing today’s low-income, minority urban children – lack of access to high-quality public education and childhood obesity.

“We wanted to create an environment that nourishes both the mind and the body of children,” said Slade. “Our philosophy is based on research showing that students who are healthy and active perform better in the classroom.”

At Namaste, training in health and nutrition and regular physical activity are integral components of the academic curriculum. Just at a time when many schools have dropped P.E. class and have been criticized for food served in the cafeteria, Namaste has taken a completely different approach.

- The school gets students moving bright and early in the morning with its “walking school buses,” a human-powered train that safely walks children to school.
- Once students arrive at school, they start their day with a nutritious breakfast followed by “morning movement” that includes stretches and yoga poses.
- Later in the day, students get a full hour of gym as well as outside recess.
- Beyond the structured activities, teachers keep kids moving all day long by building physical activity into lessons on reading, writing and arithmetic.
- Nutrition is taught in the classroom and promoted in the cafeteria, which features a “creation station” at lunch that’s stocked with fresh fruit, vegetables and whole grains.
- Parents also receive training in nutrition and have access to a weekly farmers market that Namaste sets up in the school.

A recent evaluation of Namaste shows that this “immersion” approach is paying off. Researchers with the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children found that

during the first school year, physical activity of the students significantly improved and the percentage of overweight children decreased. The students' BMI or body mass index did not increase – indicating that unhealthy weight gain was halted.

Additionally, in a city where most kids fall short of the state's literacy goals, 80 percent of the students at Namaste are doing better than the average in Chicago.

A View Inside the Classroom and Cafeteria

At NamasteShares.org, educators and parents can log on to the Web site to view video of Namaste in action. The curriculum and classroom materials are available, along with links to the resources used at the school. A full “curriculum map” is featured – including objectives aligned to state academic standards and activities to implement the objectives. Photos and videos of Namaste teachers and students help to demonstrate the activities and assessments.

The site also includes a teacher bulletin board, which allows educators from across the country the chance to share the ideas that are working (or not working) in their schools. Parents can find tips on how to bring the Namaste philosophy to their child's school and tools for integrating healthy habits into their child's everyday routine at home.

The funding for Namaste Shares! was provided by Mars, Incorporated – a company dedicated to health and well-being. For more than 25 years, Mars has supported nutrition research and innovative approaches to nutrition education.

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