

LUSITO SCHOOL FOR DIFFERENTLY-ABLED PROMOTES HOLISTIC APPROACH TO LEARNER HEALTH

Schools are not only expected to give learners a good academic foundation, they are under increasing pressure to ensure their learners get regular exercise and eat healthily.

This is to counterbalance the lifestyle choices made by many families in a technology-driven world where young people are glued to their screens and fast-food is an easier choice for parents who live demanding lives.

Of course, it should not only fall to schools to get children to adopt good habits, but it does help if they learn about healthier regimens in the classroom and on the playground. It also helps if tuck-shops offer healthier food and learners are educated about the benefits of eating healthily.

South Africa instituted School Health Week a few years ago to highlight various health issues at local schools and roll out basic health screening to learners at schools in areas identified as priority health districts.

This year, School Health Week, which runs from 15 to 19 October, has been embraced by several schools throughout the country. One of these schools, Lusito School for the differently-abled, has established a holistic health programme to promote mental, physical and emotional learner wellbeing.

"We believe in maintaining balance in all aspects of our learners' lives and our numerous activities are aimed at lifting their spirits, moving their bodies and stimulating their minds," says principal, Deolinda Molina.

Lusito School learners benefit from a host of co-curricular activities such as speech therapy, physiotherapy, reflexology, hydrotherapy, pottery, baking and music. "Many of these activities are aimed at getting them to move their bodies and express themselves. It is especially important for learners confined to wheelchairs to move and keep their musculature strong," adds Molina.

Diet is another aspect of learner health that Lusito School takes seriously. "We provide our learners with a balanced meal every day, which includes a protein, a carbohydrate and vegetables. We also monitor their intake. If they don't eat enough, we notify their parents so that they can make sure they eat something at supper time."



Importantly, Lusito School does not put sugar into any of the beverages it serves and serves up water rather than juice. "We try to encourage parents to cut sugar out of their children's diets, but of course we cannot monitor this. We also give our learners lots of time to eat and never force them to eat.

"Some of our learners cannot feed themselves and have to receive their nutrition via gastric feeding tubes. Where learners have specific dietary requirements, parents have to provide their meals or supplements as this is more than the school budget can accommodate. The school is funded with proceeds from the annual Lusito Land Festival and other fundraising activities, which means we operate on an extremely tight budget," explains Molina.

Learners also spend time outdoors and the school has created a vegetable garden where they help with growing their own food. Whatever is not used in the school's kitchen is packaged and sold to parents or visitors.

"Some of our learners are hyper-sensitive, which means they are sensitive to light, touch and sound. To help them overcome their fears, we have created a sensory room. Here they can experience different textures, sounds, colours and lighting," says Molina.

On the academic front, learners are placed in classes according to their cognitive abilities rather than their age. Depending on their progress, they can proceed from perceptual classes to advanced perceptual classes and vocational classes.

The curriculum incorporates perceptual and life orientation programmes, including listening, reading, mathematics, personal development, social skills, survival and safety skills, independent living skills, work skills and entrepreneurial skills, amongst many others.

"Our learners' mental health is just as important as their physical and emotional health. Most of our teachers have been at the school many years and have developed meaningful relationships with the learners and their families. Most importantly, everyone who teaches here knows they are contributing to a better quality of life for learners and their families and this is deeply satisfying," concludes Molina.

Ends

