



Fat School

Photographs by Stéphan Gladieu
Text by Anne Sengès

In a country where one out of every three kids is overweight, Wellspring Academy of California, a boarding school for obese teenagers, hopes to offer a long-term solution to obesity in America.

Mens et Salvere, Mind and Health. More precisely: "The development of the mind will progress in lockstep with overall health." That's the motto of the first boarding school for weight-loss in the United States, located among orchards at the foot of the Sierras, in Reedley, California, at the heart of an agricultural valley. The slogan summarizes the school's ambition: to help kids shed pounds by working their minds as well as their bodies and teach them how to become long-term weight controllers.

Whereas weight-loss camps have been popular for the past 10 years, most of the kids gain their weight back. The Wellspring Academy of California hopes to teach its students - about 83 of them right now - new behaviors to help them control their weight after they leave. "The uniqueness of the program comes from its simplicity," in the words of David Melear, its executive director.

Wellspring Academy of California, a boarding school for obese teenagers, is the first boarding school for weight loss in the United States. Students earn better grades at Wellspring as their self-confidence increases. Many were underperforming academically because of behavioral problems. Children come from as far as Mexico, Scotland and even Kuwait to attend the school. Most stay between 4 and 18 months. A typical day at Wellspring involves waking up at 07:00, exercising for an hour, eating breakfast and doing chores, attending school from 09:30 to 15:25 (nutrition, culinary and fitness classes are mandatory in the curriculum) and then more exercising before and after dinner. Students consume a very low-fat diet (20grams or less of fat per day) and are required to take at least 10,000 steps a day (tracked with a pedometer). The school, run by 30 staffers, costs USD \$6,250 per month for tuition and boarding, although the facilities are far from luxurious.

The recipe for losing weight, as purveyed by the school, seems indeed simple enough:

- consume a very low-fat diet (20 grams of fat or less per day)
- be physically active (aim for at least 10,000 steps a day, tracked with a pedometer)
- oversee the food you eat and your steps with the help of a self-monitoring journal (SMJ, in the school's jargon)

Dan Kirschenbaum, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Medical School, who is also the clinical director of Healthy Living Academies, the company that operates the school, says "These three simple directives are effective solutions that help students maintain their weight far from the confines of the school." Wellspring Academy of California, founded in 2004, boasts that more than 50% of the kids have maintained their weight loss 18 months after leaving the school.



Every Tuesday the girls have the option to jump on the scale to monitor their weight loss but this is not mandatory. Students don't get penalized if they gain weight.

Children come from as far as Mexico, Scotland and even Kuwait to attend Wellspring in a desperate attempt to regain their self-confidence and live normal lives in a world where thinness is often associated with beauty. Most stay between 4 and 18 months. Muneera Al-Yahya, 19, and two of her sisters were sent from Kuwait by their American-born mother. Weighing 102 kilos on arrival, the 1.67m tall Muneera is now down to 87 kilos - the kids jump on the scale once a week - but she claims she can't leave before reaching her goal of 63 kilos. "I can't lose weight at home," she explains. "If I start a diet, I stick to it for two weeks and then give up. I signed up for a gym but only went twice. Here I just can't give up. Especially if I want to reach the next level," she says, referring to the "summit system" that governs the school.



Strength training exercises are part of the program at Wellspring. The campus has a fully equipped weights room. A typical day at Wellspring involves waking up at 07:00, exercising for an hour, eating breakfast and doing chores, attending school from 09:30 to 15:25 (nutrition, culinary and fitness classes are mandatory in the curriculum) and then more exercising before and after dinner. Students consume a very low-fat diet (20grams or less of fat per day) and are required to take at least 10,000 steps a day (tracked with a pedometer).

The school, run by 30 staffers, costs \$6250 per month for tuition and boarding, although the facilities are far from luxurious - the run-down dorms in the 68-hectare campus once housed a psychiatric hospital. It's a big investment for most families. While Muneera and her sisters come from a wealthy background, Macy Marquez, aged 15, weighing 175kg, from San Diego, California, is using her grandmother's retirement money to pay for her tuition, and Seth, aged 18, weighing 127kg, had to take out a \$50,000 loan to finance the program. "I am sacrificing my college money because my health is important," he says, but admits he stills hopes to go on to Ph.D. in computer sciences. Critics are quick to point out that studies have shown a high prevalence of obesity in low income and African-American or Latino schoolchildren, whereas most of the Wellspring Academy's population is white. As Jill, aged 17, weighing 73kg, puts it, "This is supposed to be a school for obese people, but most people who are really overweight and would really benefit from it can't afford the program. This is a school for rich kids".



Macy Marquez from San Diego, California, is using her grandmother's retirement money to pay for her USD \$6,250 per month tuition and boarding. She weighs 175kg, but aims to lose 100kg.



Group therapy is part of the recipe for success. Twice a week, for an hour and a half, students meet in group settings with their behavioral coaches as well as in individual settings.

Excess weight is devastating not only physically but emotionally, argues Sammi Gaspar, clinical director at Wellspring, which is why individual and group therapy from behavioral coaches has such a huge impact. "While we do focus on weight management, it is equally important to recognize that most kids have some psychological issues. A lot of them are depressed, have low self-esteem and lack social skills. Some have family issues, which is why we really try to get the families involved by having weekly conversation with the parents," she says. Every couple of months, the school also holds workshops for the parents, run by psychiatrist and program cofounder Kirschenbaum, to educate them about the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

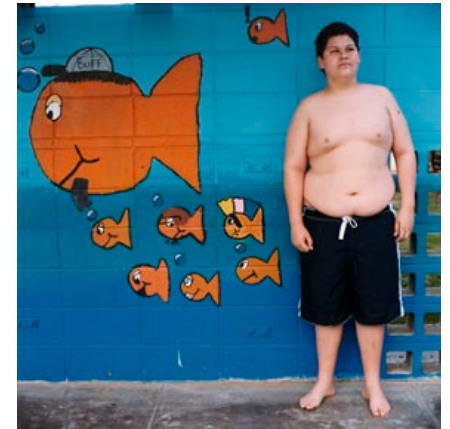
A typical day at Wellspring involves waking up at 07:00, exercising for an hour, eating breakfast and doing chores (students are responsible for cleaning their rooms and dorms), attending school from 09:30 to 15:25 (nutrition, culinary and fitness classes are mandatory in the curriculum) and then more exercising before and after dinner. The most popular course, hands down, is chef Erin Gaughan's culinary class. "I try to teach them to eat food that's cooked right, rather than diet food," says Erin as she demonstrates different chicken recipes using ingredients from apricot jam to thyme. At the end of the class the 10 students in attendance get to taste the chicken, but with one requirement: to write down in their self-monitoring journals the 35 calories consumed in the tasting. At Wellspring calorie counting is serious business.

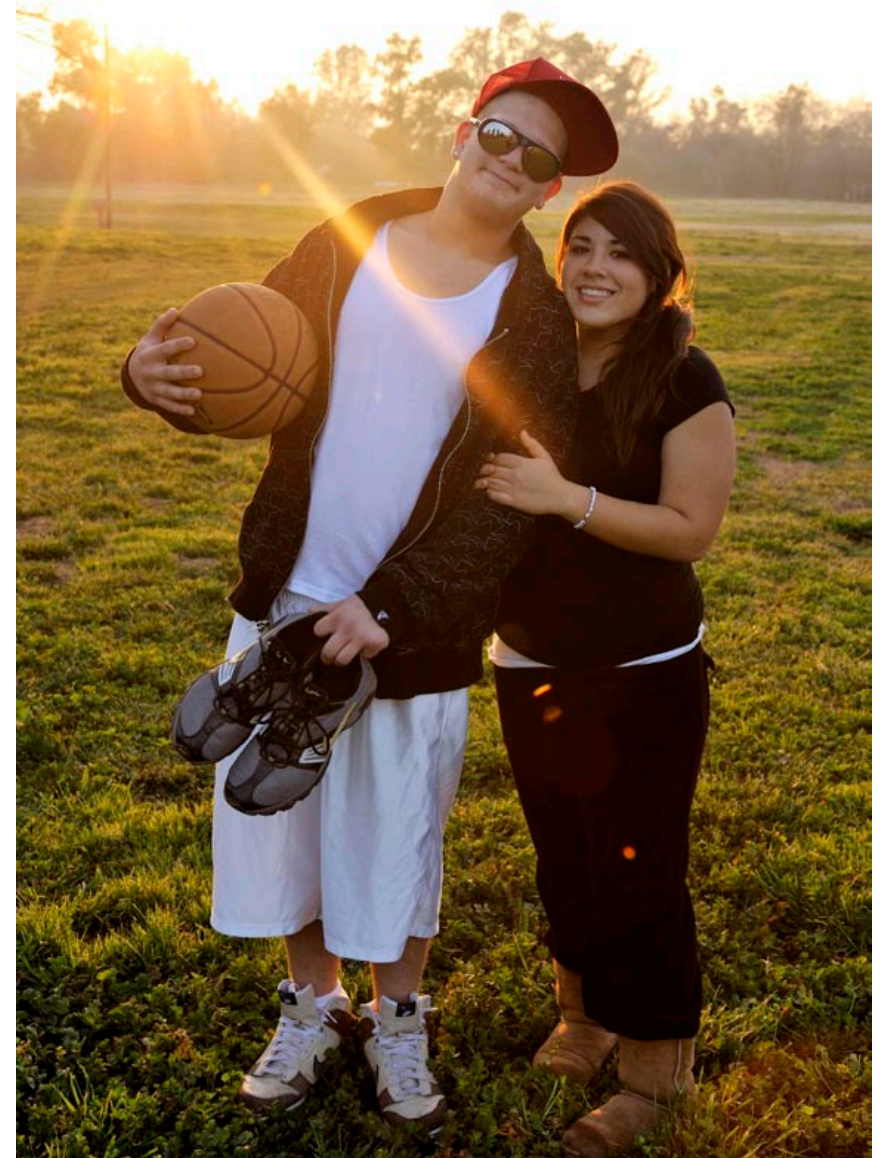


Chef Erin Gaughan's culinary class is the most popular class. Students are taught how to cook healthy food.



There is a heated swimming pool on campus. Water aerobic classes are popular among students, who are used to a sedentary lifestyle.





While dating is not encouraged at the school (any sexual activity is strictly forbidden) many students find it easier to start a relationship with someone who understands their weight struggle.



Wellspring Academy of California is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. In addition to core subject requirements the school also offers courses such as fitness, culinary arts and nutrition. With weight loss comes an increase in self-esteem and students tend to achieve better grades, and be more focused on their homework. Many were underperforming academically because of behavioral problems.



This outfit hung on the wall was left by a former student as a testimony of his ability to lose weight.



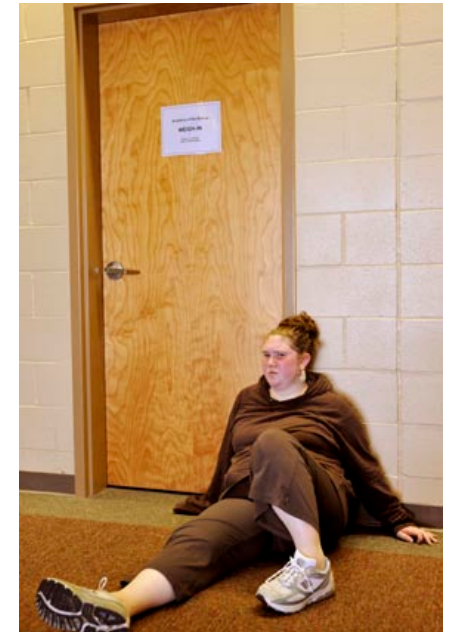
Meals are divided into "controlled foods" and "uncontrolled foods". Students are permitted specific portions of entrees and snacks but can eat an unlimited amount of soup, fresh fruit and salad.



Living arrangements vary from 2 to 4 students per room. These two roommates chose to decorate their room with images of food they crave but can no longer have.



Students oversee the food they eat with the help of self-monitoring journals (SMJ, in the school's jargon). Meals are divided into "controlled foods" and "uncontrolled foods". Students are permitted specific portions of entrees and snacks but can eat an unlimited amount of soup, fresh fruit and salad.



A student waiting to check her weight. This is not mandatory and students don't get penalized for gaining weight.



At Wellspring there is no strict dress code. Girls are allowed to wear makeup. Excess weight is devastating not only physically but emotionally, argues Sammi Gaspar, clinical director at Wellspring. "While we do focus on weight management, it is equally important to recognize that most kids have some psychological issues. A lot of them are depressed, have low self-esteem and lack social skills."



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