

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Standout college athlete inspires healthy habits at two schools in Kootenai County

AT A GLANCE

A college athlete with hometown ties serves as a role model to inspire physical activity among students at two elementary schools in the Coeur d'Alene School District.

The Situation

Regular physical activity has a number of benefits for youth, including positive effects on development, cardiovascular health and weight maintenance. National guidelines recommend that children and adolescence engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. However, few youth meet current physical activity recommendations. In Idaho, 12.4% of children do not engage in any physical activity. Additionally, there are disparities in activity levels with lower-income adolescents being less active. Research suggests social factors are related to increased physical activity amongst youth and having a role model can influence levels of physical activity.

Our Response

The Eat Smart Idaho program has had a long history of identifying healthy role models who visit elementary schools to promote physical activity and healthy eating habits. For several years, area firefighters in Coeur d'Alene, Post Falls and Rathdrum fulfilled this role spending time with students in their classrooms and at lunch and recess. In 2024, the Eat Smart Idaho program tested having a college athlete visit local elementary schools who once had strong ties with the Coeur d'Alene community.



Youth at Bryan Elementary are excited to have a photo with college athlete Jack Prka after his week of Eat Smart Idaho classes.

In May, Eat Smart Idaho teamed up with Carroll College star quarterback Jack Prka, a Coeur d'Alene native and former standout at Coeur d'Alene High School, now a senior at Carroll. Jack was an ideal ambassador for promoting healthy eating and physical activity, exemplifying how dedication and hard work lead to success at a high athletic level. Nearing completion of his elementary education degree, Jack is well known in the Coeur d'Alene community, not only for his athletic talent but also for his commitment to giving back. Jack led all PE classes at Bryan and Borah Elementary schools, where over 50% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. His lesson featured an engaging MyPlate presentation, teaching students about food groups and sharing his favorite foods that has fueled his academic and athletic success. Jack also

emphasized the importance of physical activity, guiding students through football drills that included flag-pulling games in the gym and outdoor throwing practice. At the end of each session, Jack threw long passes in true quarterback style, giving each student a chance to sprint down the field to catch his throws — a thrilling highlight for everyone involved. At each school site, the experience wrapped up with Jack's time in the school cafeteria where a custom player card featuring Jack's photo on one side and his healthy eating tips on the other were handed out for students to have signed. Students eagerly lined up to get his autograph and before long, Jack signed not just his player card, but also shoes, hats, shirts and footballs.

Program Outcomes

One-time surveys were collected with most classrooms at both elementary school sites. Of the 218 captured surveys, 180 students stated they learned something new about physical activity from Jack. More so, many students wrote down a new behavior that they would like to try in effort to be more physically active, ideas included:

- Playing at the end of the school day at the field; Riding my bike more; Going for a walk to get outside; Playing less than 10 minutes of video games each day; Walking my dog because it's good exercise for me and my dog; Playing more soccer; Doing one minute of planks every morning before school and after school; Riding my bike when my mom is out for a run; Doing 10 burpees every day; Practice jumping rope for at least 10 minutes every day.

Kerry Deremiah, fourth grade teacher at Bryan Elementary said "Jack Prka's visit to Bryan Elementary was impactful to our students. His message of Dream big, work hard and never give up" is evident in all the quotes below from the students of Bryan and Borah Elementary.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Student quotes:

- "He was so nice!"
- "He is famous and I have his autograph!"
- "He was a cool dude!"
- "I loved the cards he passed out."
- "He is really athletic."
- "He was respectful."
- "He is really good sport."
- "He was helpful."
- "He was really kind."
- "I want to be like Jack."



Player card developed to encourage healthy habits after college athlete visit.

The Future

Building on the success and impact of this idea, Eat Smart Idaho plans to continue pursuing similar engagements for local youth.