A little sprinkle of education and a dollop of praise can go a long way toward encouraging elementary school children to make healthy choices at lunchtime. That’s what preliminary results showed in “Making Healthy Decisions,” a program being tested at Jesse Boyd Elementary School by Wofford’s Dr. David Pittman ’94, along with six students and a professor for another Upstate university.

Pittman, associate professor of psychology, and Dr. Jennifer Parker, associate professor of psychology at the University of South Carolina Upstate, along with students from both institutions, worked as a team to develop the project, collect the data and report the results. Wofford students on the team were Sara Riggs, Christina Jackson, An Le, Brittnay Gray and Jonathan Why; Emily Sheehan from USC Upstate also was part of the team.

With more than 30 percent of South Carolina school children being overweight, Pittman says, something has to be done about helping students make healthier food choices. That’s why the program was started, in partnership with the Spartanburg District 7 elementary school and its food service company, Chartwells School Dining Services.

Chartwells already provided nutritious options of three main entrees, four side items and 1% white, chocolate, vanilla- or strawberry-flavored milk every day. It identified one entrée and complimentary side items, along with non-fat or low-fat milk, as the “Balanced Choices” option, that exceeds the national standard for daily nutrition set by the USDA for elementary school children.

For 10 days in October, Pittman and his team simply recorded the entrée and side item selections by the students, before holding an “education and awareness day” on Nov. 3. They presented the “Making Healthy Decisions” program on the health benefits of choosing the “Balanced Choices” options and white milk over flavored milk.

Then, for 10 days beginning Nov. 5, students were informed of the balanced lunch options during daily morning announcements — through videos featuring the Wofford and Upstate students dressed as vegetables and fruits. Then began the incentive program in which students selecting all of the balanced lunch items and 1% white milk were given public recognition — being able to ring a bell in the cafeteria and receiving a special sticker. Each day, a graph representing the percent of healthy decisions made by each grade was posted at the cafeteria.

“Public recognition is a strong motivator, and we believe that being able to get up and ring a bell during the lunch period is an exciting event for elementary students,” Pittman says. “Our goal was for students to associate the positive emotions of ringing the bell and receiving public recognition with having made a healthy eating decision.”

The early results looked good. Before the program began, fewer than five percent of the students were choosing the balanced lunch on any given day.

“On our first ‘incentive day,’ there was a dramatic increase in both the choice of balanced lunches and white milk,” says Pittman. “It was really amazing to see such dramatic results in just one day, and we expect to see continued improvement in the selection of balanced lunches and white milk as we continue the program.”

Data collected in the first few days showed that more than 50 percent of all students chose the balanced lunch selections in November compared to 1 percent in October, with kindergartners hitting a high of 77 percent balanced lunches. More than 70 percent of the students in all grades chose white milk, also a dramatic increase from 28 percent in October.

Again, kindergartners led the way with 93 percent choosing white over flavored milk.

The education and incentive program continued at Jesse Boyd through Nov. 17, but Pittman hopes what the students have learned will stick with them forever, and he is encouraging parents to continue to encourage their children. “Parents can help make a difference, too. In fact, parents have much more influence over their children’s diet and eating habits than any program implemented within the school system.”

He says parents should talk to their children about making healthy decisions when choosing their food, and they should praise their children for making those choices. “Working together, as a community, we can reduce the prevalence of childhood overweight conditions and improve the quality of life for our children,” he adds.

by Laura H. Cortin

(Left) Students dressed at fruits and vegetables to get attention while they explained the food pyramid. (Below) Student volunteers with Pittman outside Jesse Boyd Elementary (JBE) School.