

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Weighing Choices

A new private school aims to help overweight boys and girls make better decisions about how much to eat and how often to exercise.

**By Rhea R. Borja**  
*Reedley, Calif.*

On a foggy December night, silence envelops this tiny agricultural town nestled at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains. But turn onto a narrow two-lane paved road, and soon noise punctuates the air.

In a corner of a 68-acre school campus here, the thwack of hockey sticks hitting blacktop and shouts of teenagers echo across acres of peach orchards. Halogen lights flood a basketball court where a half-dozen middle and high school students dodge and weave during the street hockey game, their faces rosy-cheeked from exertion.

It seems like a typical after-school game. But such physical activity was unthinkable for these students a few short months ago.

In September, some couldn't walk from their dormitory to the main school building without getting winded. A leisurely two-mile bike ride left them exhausted.

But in this hour-long game, many dart up and down the court in short bursts of speed.

The students attend the private Academy of the Sierras, billed as the nation's first weight-loss school for obese teenagers. Students must be at least 30 pounds overweight for two years to attend the yearlong boarding school, which offers mandatory exercise, behavioral therapy, college-prep classes, and a healthy food regimen.

The aim: shedding and keeping off excess pounds through improving all dimensions of a student—academic, emotional, and physical, school administrators say. The school has 32 students, many of them girls, and may enroll up to 70 8th to 12th graders by the end of the school year.

“We’re teaching a lifestyle, a healthy obsession,” says Daniel S. Kirschenbaum, the director of Healthy Living Academies, a division of the for-profit Aspen Education Group, which owns the Academy of the Sierras. The company, based in Cerritos, Calif., operates 30 therapeutic boarding schools, as well as weight-loss camps and outdoor education programs in 11 states.

That means that while academy staff members guide the students, the responsibil-



Each student receives a fitness test during orientation week. The test includes taking “before” body measurements, as personal trainer John Peterson does with student Mal Mahedy, 16.



A game of volleyball ends the second day of orientation for staff and students at the newly opened Academy of the Sierras, which is billing itself as the first residential boarding school for overweight teens in the nation. Center is Terry Henry, 16.



Students and staff enjoy the fire and roast marshmallows for S'Mores after an evening walk into the woods. The group later told ghost stories around the fire. Left to right are program founder Ryan Craig, students Jarrett Fitzpatrick and Terry Henry.

ity to change bad habits rests on the students' shoulders. So the students constantly monitor themselves: They write down the number of calories and fat grams they eat at each meal. They wear pedometers (as does the staff) to ensure they walk at least 10,000 steps daily. And they keep journals noting their emotional, physical, and academic progress.

"Self-monitoring is key to successful weight loss," says Molly Carmel, who as clinical director is in charge of the school's behavior therapy program. "Everyone is empowered."

Unlike other popular weight-loss programs, the academy doesn't stint on food. Students can have their fill of a colorful salad and fruit bar, which features "uncontrolled foods" that are low in calories and fat. "Controlled foods"—such as baked ham, rice, and potato pancakes—are carefully measured by cafeteria employees. Students can come back for seconds, but must note the amounts in their food journals.

Mal Mahedy, a veteran of weight-loss camps at age 16, says she's learning a new way to eat. "There are a lot of different selections here," she says. "Not like at weight-loss camp, where all I ate were veggie burgers."

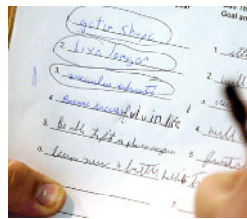
Cooking healthy, low-fat meals is also one of the practical skills the students learn. They prepared most of the dishes for both the school's Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas banquet.

"Before I came here," Mal says as she chops onions in culinary class, "I didn't even know how to crack an egg." That is one of many differences students experience when they come here.

Another is that the ubiquitous noise of modern technologies is muted. GameBoys, televisions, and computers are barred from dorm rooms. Internet use is limited to academic research in a computer lab under adult supervision, and students are allowed to call home just twice a week. The lone TV set resides in the workout room, in front of shiny new exercise machines.

"If you really want to see 'The O.C.,'" says program director Dan Barney, referring to the popular teenage drama, "you have to do it while on a treadmill."

In fact, the students exercise throughout the day, starting with



During orientation week, a student fills out a questionnaire that asks the teenagers about their goals for the program.



Crystal Arispe, 20, left, Krystal Cvitanovich, 18, center, and Terry Henry, 16, relax in the Academy's main lobby, a gathering place for students during the morning break.

### Three Months Later, 50 Pounds Lighter

When 12-year-old Jarrett Fitzpatrick first came to the Academy of the Sierras, he carried more than 200 pounds on his 5-foot-5 frame.

The sandy-haired 8th grader from suburban Chicago was a pro at air hockey, but fumbled in more active pursuits such as volleyball and softball. His excess weight prematurely wore down his shoes, and he regularly got blisters on his feet.

At his old middle school, thinner classmates taunted him, his grades plummeted, and he had very low self-esteem, his father says. And Jarrett, who has three older, thinner siblings, continued to gain weight. "Once you're a little overweight, someone makes fun of you, and you start overeating to make yourself feel better," says his father, Brian Fitzpatrick, a small-business owner and retired commodities broker.

So Jarrett came to the academy, which was founded to meet the needs of students who are overweight. He was unsure about the school at first, he admits, and sometimes got overwhelmed with its expectations.

But in his first three months at the academy, Jarrett lost 50 pounds. His grades have improved, and he seems to have calmed down and matured, his father says.

a two- to three-mile walk at 7 a.m. and ending at 10 p.m. with a vigorous game of hockey or basketball. They have weekly sessions with a personal trainer, and sometimes the students go on active overnight trips, such as camping and hiking in nearby Kings Canyon National Park.

Many of the students here lacked the study skills, discipline, and motivation to get good grades at their former schools. So each of them gets a personal academic plan and attends mandatory study hall every night after dinner. Academic director Krista Chikwava also works with the students' home schools to ensure students take the classes they need so they will be on track when they return to those schools.

Classes here are harder than at his old school in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., says Kevin Marema, 12. "The deadlines for assignments are longer, and the teachers aren't constantly reminding us," he says. "So it puts more responsibility on the student."

Therapy is also a major component of the academy. Many of the students, who were often teased at their old schools, battle behavioral or mental-health problems. So they attend two group-therapy sessions and two individual sessions a week.

The sessions help students understand the emotional issues underlying their weight gain. And they learn how to better cope in a world that tempts people with a double cheeseburger and fries in one commercial, only to taunt them with images of stick-thin models in another.

"[Therapy] is the heart of the change process," says Kirschenbaum.

The Academy of the Sierras is a venture into the unknown for the Aspen Education Group. No blueprint existed for such a school, says David Burns, the academy's director of operations.

Many of the students, who were often teased at their old schools, battle behavioral or mental-health problems.

The company has sunk at least \$5 million into buying and renovating the school and its capacious grounds, which border the Kings River. The school, once a convalescent hospital run by Mennonites, likely won't see a profit for at least a couple of years, Burns says.

It opened as childhood-obesity rates are a rising concern. The percentage of overweight 6- to 19-year-olds nationwide has tripled since 1980, to 16 percent, according to the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Consequently, obesity-related illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and sleep apnea have increased sharply in children and adolescents.

"We have really fumbled the ball," says Paul M. Ribisl, a professor of health and exercise science at Wake

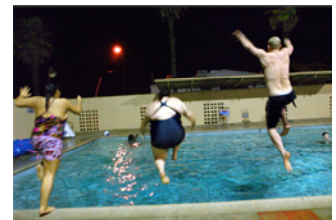
### Three Months Later, 50 Pounds Lighter (continued)

When he was home for Christmas, Jarrett continued to count his calories religiously. When he went to the movies, he asked whether the popcorn was air-popped or cooked in oil, says his father, amused.

Some of Jarrett's healthy habits have also rubbed off on his father, 48, who now wears a pedometer to track his daily steps, and tries to eat more healthfully.

"I really questioned whether a healthy diet and exercise would work," says Mr. Fitzpatrick. "And it's working wonderfully."

—Rhea R. Borja



Pool activities are popular at Academy of the Sierras. A night swim session in the heated campus pool draws many students, as well as residential adviser Tyler Cornell, right. Students have scheduled physical activities until 10 p.m. on most nights.

Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. “In this society, exercise is gone and food is everywhere.”

What’s most alarming, he adds, is that while the increasing rates of obesity in adults have been gradual, the rise in childhood obesity has been more dramatic.

So the Academy of the Sierras is an idea whose time has come, Ribisl says. He applauds how the school is trying to change unhealthy behaviors gradually and in a supportive setting.

“A school that teaches them about their bodies and shows that everyone can manage their own weight is good,” he says.

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At 16, Terry Henry sports multiple body piercings, messy hair, and an impish grin. He favors black T-shirts with statements such as “Chaos. Pain. Disorder. I see my work here is done,” and displays an often-bawdy sense of humor.

In September, the 5-foot-11 student from Exeter, N.H., weighed 511 pounds, couldn’t walk a block without wheezing, and couldn’t get off a couch without help. By December, he was 116 pounds lighter and had dropped 11 clothing sizes.

He says he’s more energetic and routinely logs more than 20,000 steps a day. And Terry, who once slammed his fist into a brick wall in frustration, feels less angry and more self-confident. He looks forward to going home to his family and friends.

“I get to show them my new self,” he says with a shy smile.

Other students have similar tales. In September, many were at times sullen and sluggish. All were homesick. By mid-December, they look markedly thinner and seem more confident.

Kevin, who has lost 40 pounds so far, and now weighs about 200 pounds, says both of his parents have had gastric-bypass surgery, which reduces a stomach to the size of a golf ball. He didn’t want that in his future. So he chose to go to the academy. “This was almost my last resort,” Kevin says.

Being teenagers, the students still lapse into bouts of uncertainty and moodiness. And sometimes the tension between students is palpable. Tempers flare.

“There’s a lot of drama here right now,” says Tiara Jones, 16, one morning before final exams as a classmate yells in exasperation to another, who screams back.

Yet for the most part, the students are supportive of one another, and even comfortable enough to poke fun at themselves.

One morning in the computer lab, 12-year old Jarrett Fitzpatrick Googles “fat animals.” Images of portly cats pop up on his computer screen. Scrolling over a photo of a rotund prairie dog, he stage whispers, “That’s the AOS mascot.”



Program founder Ryan Craig and student Mal Mahedy walk together after Craig loaned Mahedy his socks to help relieve a blister she developed. Students begin each day at 7 a.m. with a mandatory physical activity such as the popular two-mile lap around farming fields surrounding the school.



Academy executive director Ryan Craig serves Tiara Jones, 16, left, a weighed portion of pasta during a holiday dinner the week before Christmas break. The school considers higher-calorie cafeteria choices “controlled foods” and monitors them, while others, such as most salad bar items, are available in unlimited quantities. The students, who modified existing recipes to make them healthier, cooked the entire meal.

Another night, a handful of students swim in the school's heated outdoor pool despite the chilly temperature. Steam rises from the water as 16-year-old Theresa Cocuzza gets ready to dive in.

"Watch it!" she yells to the students already in the pool. "Fat person coming through!"

They laugh good-naturedly, but Jarrett admonishes her. "We're all fat," he says. "You can't say that."

"Yes I can. I'm not skinny," Theresa says indignantly.

"You are," he insists. "Your suit is falling off of you."

She doesn't reply, but looks pleased. Indeed, while her pink one-piece swimsuit is not, in fact, falling off, it is several sizes too big. Over the past few months, she's lost more than 40 pounds.

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But experts say that losing weight is only half the battle. Keeping the weight off is the real test. Judith S. Stern, the co-founder and vice president of the Washington-based American Obesity Association, is one expert who is taking a wait-and-see approach before drawing conclusions about the academy.

"I have no doubt they'll lose weight when they're in the program," she says of the students. "But what about when they go back home?"

That's something the academy prepares for, says Carmel, the clinical director. The students go to local restaurants each month, for example, to get used to ordering nutritious meals. They've gone on a scavenger hunt at a local supermarket to find

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low-fat food. Teachers and members of the residential staff also talk to parents weekly about their children's progress and how they can help them once they return.

And once the students leave the school, they'll participate in a six-month online "after care" program. The Web site will include a journal so they can keep monitoring their diet and exercise, a message board so they can chat with other students, and a venue to communicate with an academy therapist.

"We start discharge planning from day one," says Carmel.

Thanksgiving was the first time the students were home. Almost all kept monitoring what they ate. Only two gained weight, which was less than a pound.

But many of the students did not keep exercising, says Ryan Craig, the academy's



Krystal Cvitanovich answers a question during a classroom orientation session led by academic director Krista Chikwava during students' first week on campus. The school, which currently has 32 students, is steadily expanding its enrollment but plans to keep class sizes below 15 students per class.



The original "group of seven," the first set of students at Academy of the Sierras, has their last combined cognitive behavioral therapy session in the fall before the arrival of two new students signals the necessity of breaking up into smaller group meetings. Left to right, Jarrett Fitzpatrick, 12, Terry Henry, 16, Mal Mahedy, 16 and Theresa Cocuzza, 16.



Jarrett Fitzpatrick relaxes in the Kings River, the destination of an off-campus Saturday bike ride from Academy of the Sierras in September. To the right is recreational therapist Melissa Freeman.

executive director. So when the students went home for Christmas, they were given personalized instructions on how to keep physically active.

Another criticism of the school is its price tag. At \$5,500 a month, or \$44,000 per school year, the academy is out of reach for most families. The poor and some minority groups have higher obesity rates than the national average, notes Alicia Moag-Stahlberg, the executive director for Action For Healthy Kids, a Skokie, Ill.-based nonprofit organization that aims to improve nutrition and physical activity in public schools.

“For a lot of kids, this school isn’t going to be an affordable option,” she says.

The academy’s monthly cost is in the upper range for therapeutic boarding schools, which cost \$3,700 to \$5,500 a month, according to the Prescott, Ariz.,-based National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs.

Craig points out that medical insurance often covers a portion of the school fees. He adds that the school offers a student loan program, and may promote scholarships for students in the future.

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On one of the last school nights in December, multicolored lights swirl in a darkened room, Usher’s “Yeah!” pounds on the stereo system, and students wave neon-green glow-sticks in time with the hip-hop beat. A machine blows bubbles above the students’ bobbing heads.

It’s the academy’s first holiday dance, and all of the students are throwing their best moves on the dance floor. In a few days, they go home for Christmas, and the students’ exuberance is infectious.

They sing along. They jump up and down. Terry plays air guitar and hops on both feet. He gets carried away, and falls on the confetti-littered floor. But he doesn’t retreat to the sidelines in embarrassment.

Instead, he laughs, gets up, and brushes himself off. He starts dancing again.



In her dorm room, Jessi Fay, 17, gets help with her hair from residential adviser Elsa Garza in preparation for the holiday formal at the school that evening. Students hired a disc jockey and decorated for the event, which they dubbed “Winter Jam.” The event was held to celebrate the end of the semester.



Strobe lights flash in the main room of the girls’ dorm during “Winter Jam” while students dance. Left is Krystal Cvitanovich.

# Portraits



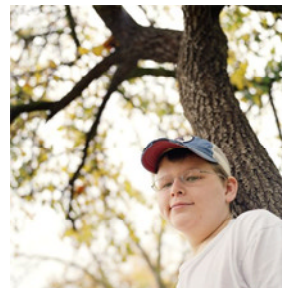
Krystal Cvitanovich, 18  
San Pedro, CA  
September, 2004



Krystal Cvitanovich, 18  
San Pedro, CA  
December, 2004  
weight lost: 43 pounds



Jarrett Fitzpatrick, 12  
St. Charles, IL  
September 2004



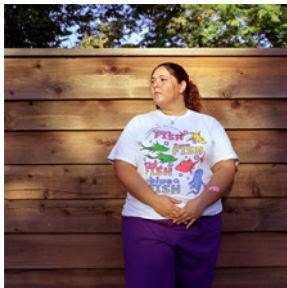
Jarrett Fitzpatrick, 12  
St. Charles, IL  
December 2004  
weight lost: 49 pounds



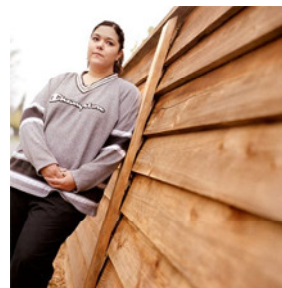
Jamie Schleifer, 15  
Edison, NJ  
September 2004



Jamie Schleifer, 15  
Edison, NJ  
December 2004  
weight lost: 33 pounds



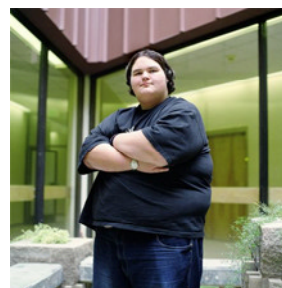
Crystal Arispe, 20  
Sacramento, CA  
September 2004



Crystal Arispe, 20  
Sacramento, CA  
December 2004  
weight lost: 57 pounds



Terry Henry, 16  
Exeter, NH  
September 2004



Terry Henry, 16  
Exeter, NH  
December 2004  
weight lost: 116 pounds