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School grants offer healthy lessons

FamilyCare gives students a hand in creating their health programs

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What's the best way to make public school kids more healthy? Why not ask the kids?

That was the thinking behind Healthy Students, Healthy Oregon, a grant program launched this year by FamilyCare Health Plans. The insurance company, which is based in Portland, provides Medicare health plans and contracts with the Oregon Health Plan. The company serves about 15,000 members statewide, and established Healthy Students, Healthy Oregon to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

"The idea that sort of popped up was, why don't we have the kids write their own grants and get them more involved in thinking about their own health," says Jeff Heatherington, who is a founder of FamilyCare and its chief executive officer. "They do a better job sometimes of leading than adults do."

Indeed, he says, the community has really let kids down.

"I think as a society and as adults we have totally abandoned our kids in terms of growing up healthy," Heatherington says. "We don't teach them to play, we certainly have gotten down to the bare nubbins of giving them good health education and good physical education in the schools. And that's going to produce a group of adults, frankly, that don't have a basic health education and are unfit."

Statistics bear this out. According to the American Heart Association, one in three kids is overweight or obese. This leads to a range of problems, from diabetes and heart disease to low self-esteem and depression.

"I think we're in deep trouble," Heatherington says. "People talk about the high cost of health care. That's only going to get worse if we raise a bunch of kids who don't have good, healthy habits."

Focusing on good ideas

The Healthy Students, Healthy Oregon campaign asked public school students to put together proposals to make their schools healthier. The contest was open to students living in FamilyCare's northern Oregon coverage area. The program was launched as a single-year experiment, with the possibility of continuing into the future (that's still being decided.)

Thirty-six schools in six counties entered. The five winners each received \$20,000 to fund their projects. The rules stipulated that the grants go to projects that would continue to have an impact after the money was gone.

Winners were from Hillsboro, Gladstone, Forest Grove, Fairview and Gresham. Each project was different, reflecting the different needs of the schools.

Eastwood Elementary School students will use games and activities to track their snacking and increase their exercise, and will start a walking club. John Wetten Elementary School students will use



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / PORTLAND TRIBUNE
Andrey Ivanov, a junior at Springwater Trail High School in Gresham, tends the school garden after class. The high school received \$20,000 in grant money through the Healthy Students, Healthy Oregon program to expand its current garden to include an edible landscape, native garden and outdoor classroom space.

the money to build a new salad bar and create after-school cooking classes. Reynolds Middle School will install new water fountains and teach kids about the benefits

of drinking water. Springwater Trail High School, where construction displaced an existing school garden, will build an expanded garden and use its own fruits and vegetables for snacks. And the Oregon School-Based Health Care Youth Advisory Council received funds for health education workshops that bring together students from different schools.

Heatherington, who reviewed the finalists, says, "My general impression was the kids were very thoughtful about what they wanted. They were really focusing on what would be good for them and for their schoolmates. It was quite heartwarming."

Engaged students

The downside was seeing how much is needed. All the applications had merit, and in some cases, the basic nature of the need was disturbing.

Reynolds Middle School, for instance, asked for clean drinking water.

As the Reynolds student group wrote in their application, the Healthy Hunger Free Act of 2010 requires schools to provide clean water, free of charge, to all students. But most of the drinking fountains in the school date from the 1950s. Some are completely broken. Others emit yellow and foul-tasting water, and in many fountains the water pressure is so low that students press their faces to the nozzle, spreading germs.

Students wrote, "We do have one fountain that students prefer in the building. Because of this many students crowd around this fountain during passing time. Often, this log jam causes students to be late for class. We have students coming from all over the school to drink out of the good water fountain ... it is legendary.

The proposal was not just to replace the fountains, though; it includes peer education on the value of drinking water. And each student will receive a reusable water bottle so they can bring water with them wherever they go.

This is especially important because some of the kids don't have access to good drinking water outside of school, says math teacher Donna Gallagher, one of the teachers who oversaw the project. There is a homeless population at the school, as well as students who live in substandard housing or have had their utilities cut off.

Gallagher was initially approached by the principal of the school because she's the site coordinator for AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), a college prep program. She recruited Loryn Williams, an eighth-grader, who assembled a small team – Catherine Spalding, Sammy Tun and Patrick Pham – and put the proposal together.

"They were all gung-ho for it," Gallagher says. "They really came together on it."

This is the first time that Gallagher has seen students, rather than staff, apply for a grant, and she thinks it's a great idea.

"They know what's going on," she says, and besides, "If they're not engaged in it, it's not going to happen. We need their support."

The four students who put the grant together presented their project to the student body in mid-April.

"It helps them take pride in their school," Gallagher says.