

Elementary school students tackle health issues, including quality recess time and greasy lunches



Members of the health club at Ingalls Elementary School Based Health Center enjoy their newly designed playground

Recess time at Ingalls Elementary School was anything but fun. The "playground" was a large, barren open space with black asphalt. There was no athletic equipment to use and because students were bored, fights were taking place.

That is until a group of health-conscious fourth- and fifth-graders decided to do something about it. They created a plan and met with the school vice principal to present options to improve recess.

Once they agreed on a plan they thought the school would support, the students played a lead role in implementing the solution. First, they asked for trees and a jungle gym, but learned that costs and potential for accidents were too high. Making the schoolyard bigger was not an option. So the students came up with a plan for painting the playground surface with games such as hopscotch. They planned the designs and high school students volunteered to do the painting.

These ambitious young students are members of the health club operated by

Ingalls School-Based Health Center. Located inside the elementary school, the health center is a place where students can get physical and emotional health care and learn how to be healthy. With a little creative thinking — and a grant made to the health center for the playground paint and purchase of soft kick balls and jump ropes — students in the health club were able to find ways to encourage healthy activities at recess.

The health center has a part-time community organizer, Cindy Marti, who meets with the health club students once a week for two hours after school. The agenda for club activities is student-driven. They identify the health concerns important to them, to their school and to their

community. Their current top health concerns are having adequate recess time, eliminating greasy lunches, and being careful around animals, as many students had been scared or bitten on their way to school by off-leash dogs.

Every health club meeting is attended by a nurse practitioner, who shares information on the topics the students choose to talk about. To help students understand how to bring about positive changes in health in their school and community, Cindy Marti teaches students about health policy, the importance of voting, and how a bill becomes a law.

The Massachusetts School-Based Health Care Coalition works closely with the Ingalls School-Based Health Center and encourages student participation in the political process by taking health club students to meet with lawmakers at the state Legislature. These are not casual visits. Students come prepared with information and ready to advocate for school-based health centers as a key model for providing access to quality health care for students.

“At health club, we talk about different ways to change the school and we get to meet new people,” says 11-year old Justin Fitzgerald.

What advice would young student leaders give to other students about the importance of creating change in their school and their community? “If you want something, you can’t take the word no. Keep asking. If they say no, change it around and ask the same thing in a different way or keep asking, but not as much,” says Justin.

Mildred Aguirre, a fourth-grader, offers her opinion. “It felt awesome to get what we wanted, finally [with the playground]. If you really want something, you should try your best to get it.”

Alison Efstratios, also a fourth grader agrees. “Not only big people can make changes.”

What’s next for these young policy advocates? School lunches. They say the school food is greasy, unhealthy and sometimes cold (when it shouldn’t be). They created a survey to poll all students and teachers about school lunches. “The students felt that if they had the opinions of everyone in the school, the principal would listen to them,” explains Marti.

“This is important,” says Mildred. “We learned to eat better — healthy snacks and a lot of fruits and vegetables. Eat healthy so you can live for a long time.”

The students have collected 74 survey responses so far. Their goal is 100. There is no doubt that Ingalls Elementary School will soon have healthy lunches, if this determined group of students has a say in the matter.



From left to right:
Mildred Aguirre, Justin Fitzgerald
and Alison Efstratios

The **Massachusetts Coalition on School-Based Health Care** is one of 10 recipients of multiyear funding from W.K. Kellogg Foundation for the national School-Based Health Care Policy Program. The Coalition represents 56 school-based health care centers in the state. The Lynn Community Health Center, the sponsoring organization of the Ingalls School-Based Health Center, is one of four community partners of the Massachusetts Coalition.

Launched in 2004, the **School-Based Health Care Policy Program** aims to make quality care more accessible and sustainable for children and youth. A fundamental principle of the program is the promotion of a consumer-centered model of quality care — one in which local people, including youth, shape the content, quality, delivery, and financing of health care in their communities.

For more information, visit www.mshbc.org or www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org

