

Grant gets kids walking ALIVE Center helps pay for W.R. McNeill Elementary trail

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At first glance, the oval-shaped loop that surrounds the playground at W.R. McNeill Elementary School doesn't appear to be anything special.

But when the students responsible for the newly completed "fitness trail" speak excitedly about their project, it's clear the .2 mile track is something special - a gift of health to their fellow students.

The trail was the brainchild of several students in Laurie Kwok's Project Challenge class last year: Logan West, 10; Devin Hayes and Chloe Harkins, both 9; and Emily Nole, Alexis Sweatt and Anna Siewers, all 8. Two other students, Megan Taing and Emily Gerard, have since graduated to sixth grade and are no longer at McNeill, Kwok said.

Kwok knew of a program through the ALIVE (A Local Information and Volunteer Exchange) Center that offered \$1,000 grants to schools, to be used for projects that would better the community, she said. Her Project Challenge students decided they wanted to apply for money to build a fitness trail their fellow students could use to exercise. Childhood obesity is something they've all heard about, and it was never far from their minds as they designed the trail.

"We want to help the kids stay fit," Alexis said.

It was also important to have a trail, Logan said, because during recess time the soccer field is full, as is the playground and the red-topped basketball court.

Chloe added, "It's not just for the school, it's for the neighborhood and the people living nearby."

The students met every Monday for five weeks to work on their grant application.

"It was hard work at first, but after a while we started to enjoy it and it was a lot of fun," Anna said.

To be considered for a grant, the application must be filled out by at least three children and an adult, said Leah Tibbs, youth development coordinator for the ALIVE Center. Grants are awarded to youth-serving agencies only, including churches and schools, she said, and each agency may receive \$2,000 in a calendar year. On the first of each month, a grant evaluation committee reviews the applications and selects a deserving organization.

The grant application is very "kid-friendly," Tibbs said - there are four questions to answer, and Tibbs is available to speak to grant hopefuls and help kick-start the process, she said.

"The most important thing to our staff is that it is authentically written by youth, so we're not concerned with correct grammar or whether it's handwritten or in pencil," she said. "... We just want it to be youth-driven."

The trail cost \$4,800 to build, said McNeill Principal Debbie Ecton. The school's parent-teacher association raised the remaining funds. The school is working on a new wellness policy that will definitely include the use of the trail, she said.

"It looks wonderful," Ecton said. "They did such a terrific job coming up with ideas."

Designing the trail was an exercise in trial and error. With the help of Anna's mom, Helen Siewers, the children drew up plans for the trail. After three failed designs, they hit upon the current one, and Siewers, who is the director of the Greenways Commission, used auto-CAD software to map the 5-foot-wide trail. McNeill Elementary parent Eddie Hanks, who co-owns TPM, an environmental engineering consulting group based in Bowling Green, excavated the land, put down some filter fabric to keep the dirt from mixing with the gravel and put a layer of white stones on top.

Discussions are already in the works to put some stations around the trail where students can do push-ups other strength-building activities, Hanks said.

For now, McNeill Elementary students are content to make laps. Second-graders Annie Carlisle, Jakaliff Sublett and Sarah McDaniel, all 7, walk the trail every day during recess, they said.

"It's cool," Annie said. "It helps us get lots of exercise."

Five laps around the track equal one mile, and the girls can usually walk that much, they said.

"It makes us feel so great," said Jakaliff, adding that they like to talk about what they'd like for the trail - a bridge, a fountain, a waterfall.

The trail's designers are racking up miles on the trail while they can, too.

"It's pretty sad I only get one year of it," lamented Logan, who graduates from McNeill at the end of the school year. "... It feels cool, in five or six years, when I graduate high school, I could come back and see people still walking on it and know I made that."

- To view all grant recipients online, go to www.alivebg.org.



*Photo by Joe Imel/Daily News
Jakaliff Sublett (from left), Stephanie Berec, Lauren Wiseman, Sarah McDaniel and Anne Carlisle, all second-graders, walk Wednesday on the newly created fitness trail at W.R. McNeill Elementary School.*