Pay It Forward

How to build community and support a local charity through the health.moves.minds: program

By Larissa Brickach

When the health. moves. minds. program launched nationwide in Fall 2019, many schools found one of the biggest benefits was the flexibility to fundraise in whatever way would make the biggest impact on their school … while also providing an option to give back to the community.

In fact, rather than choosing to receive 50% of the funds raised back to their school in the form of a Gopher gift card, 40% of participating schools chose to donate 25% of the amount raised to a local charity of their choice.

Here are five schools that decided to “pay it forward” by raising money for a local charity.

AQUILA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
St. Louis Park, MN

Physical education teacher Tom Roberts was excited to implement the health. moves. minds. program at Aquila Elementary School in part because it coincided with a general school-wide emphasis on social and emotional learning.

He also liked the program’s flexible fundraising platform, which would allow the school to donate 25% of the funds raised to the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) in honor of one of his students, Clara Bormann.

“ать thought choosing MDA as our charity of choice would be a great way to teach students the concept of charitable giving while at the same time giving back to the organization that has supported Clara during her courageous battle,” Roberts says.

Clara, a fourth grader, was a founding member of the school’s popular Double Dutch rope jumping club, which performed at the health. moves. minds. kick-off assembly.

Although fundraising efforts were affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the school was still able to donate more than $200 to MDA in Clara’s honor.

The health. moves. minds. program had a huge impact on school culture at Aquila Elementary, but it also affected Roberts on a personal level. “The program reminded me as a physical educator to remember the importance of my students’ socio-emotional well-being,” he says. “Every day my goal is to make connections, build relationships, and show empathy toward my students.”

FRENCH ROAD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Rochester, NY

For Krystal Forsyth, physical education teacher at French Road Elementary School, the flexibility of the health. moves. minds. fundraising program was a huge positive — but the biggest draw for her administration was the fact that the school could stay local with their fundraising efforts.

“Tens of thousands of children in our service area receive free or reduced-price lunch at school — but many go hungry when school is closed,” says Forsyth. “Rochester’s Foodlink BackPack Program provides them with bags of nutritious food they can discreetly take home and easily prepare on their own. Knowing our students could help a charity that helps kids just like them made our choice an easy one.”

During the fundraiser, notes Forsyth, students learned about the many facets of philanthropy — such as leadership, giving back, and being a part of something bigger than yourself. The French Road community showed overwhelming support, and the school raised more than $7,000 for the BackPack Program.

Forsyth hopes the relationship between the school community and the charity will be long-lasting. She’s also grateful for the personal benefits she experienced. “The health. moves. minds. program has offered me more ways to connect to students and build relationships,” she says. “When a student is excited to tell me that they set up a hot chocolate stand or collected cans, or that their family wants to volunteer … they’re showing zeal for something other than themselves. That’s my ‘why.’”

HANAHAU’OLI SCHOOL
Honolulu, HI

According to physical education teacher Jewel Toyama, the health. moves. minds. program was a “perfect match” for Hanahau’oli School in part because it offered the opportunity to support a local charity. That was important because a core component of the school’s mission is contributing to the greater community.

“Our charity of choice was the Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Science (KRS) Motor Clinic at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, now known as P.L.A.Y. for All,” says Toyama. “The
motor clinic — which is run by undergraduate students under the guidance of KRS faculty — provides children of all abilities between ages 3-10 the opportunity to develop their fine and gross motor skills. The decision to raise funds for this program was grounded in Hanahau’oli’s commitment to support the growth and development of pre-service teachers, and in the end we raised $370.”

In Hawaiian, “Hanahau’oli” means “joyous work” — and during the school’s two-hour “Jump for Joy” event, students worked in multi-age teams at 10 different activity stations. Older children helped younger children, demonstrating teamwork and respect, while hopefully finding the “joy” in helping others. Some of the stations included health. moves. minds. posters which detailed healthy habits such as Mindful Minute, Deep Breathing, and Respectful Listening.

“There was a magical buzz in the air as children experienced each station, cooperating and supporting one another and genuinely taking pride in everyone’s accomplishments,” says Toyama.

OWATIN CREEK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Reading, PA

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving last fall, students and staff at Owatin Creek Elementary dressed up like turkeys and walked laps on the school grounds as part of a Turkey Trot — the school’s health. moves. minds. fundraising event.

In past years, Owatin Creek raised money for a national diabetes organization, but health and physical education teacher Diana Bogust had been wanting to move the school’s support to a local organization. Berks T1D Connection turned out to be “an awesome fit.”

“This charity provides support, information and education to those learning to navigate the world of living with Type 1 diabetes, while helping families overcome daily challenges and celebrate victories,” says Bogust. “Through health. moves. minds. our students learned how to manage their own struggles and make the world a better place. We’re all in the same boat, just navigating through different storms!”

Families voiced their appreciation of supporting a local organization, and the students were happy to help other students who are learning to live with diabetes. In all, Owatin Creek raised more than $500 for the local charity.

On a personal level, the program impacted Bogust in a way she never could have imagined. “Almost four months after our Turkey Trot event, my own son was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and my family turned to Berks T1D Connection for help and support,” says Bogust. “I learned firsthand what a huge impact this local charity makes on families.”

RONALD REAGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
New Berlin, WI

For Katie Mulloy, physical education teacher at Ronald Reagan Elementary School, what stood out about the health. moves. minds. program was the program’s flexibility and the idea of promoting social-emotional health within her school. She also loved how easy it was to tailor the program to her own needs.

“Our school has a yearly program called #ReaganGivesBack where we try to give back to our community,” says Mulloy. “Adding the health. moves. minds. program and fundraiser fit into our school culture seamlessly!”

The school decided to support The Ability Center’s RampUp Wisconsin Avenue Park Project — a local campaign to create America’s Most Inclusive Park. Mulloy kicked off the fundraiser with an all-day, all-school disability awareness program with Damian Buchman, founder of The Ability Center.

“Damian brought in 30 sport wheelchairs and every student was able to play some fun games to get a truer picture of what being in a wheelchair might be like,” says Mulloy. “He showed students that nobody in a wheelchair is ‘disabled,’ they just have different abilities than everyone else.”

Mulloy received a lot of positive feedback about the local charity choice. “I had families reach out to say thank you for bringing this to our school community — and there was a lot of excitement because the park would be in our surrounding community for all to access,” she says. In all, the school donated nearly $500 to the local charity.