Penny Harvest program connects students with community issues

More than 7,000 elementary school children in central Ohio are experiencing first-hand the power of philanthropy through a service learning project called Penny Harvest. See Kids Dream, a local nonprofit organization, is overseeing the initiative, aimed at helping kids support issues of importance to them in their communities.

The Penny Harvest program, created by the nonprofit Common Cents New York, Inc., helps students recognize and research community needs, raise money, and make grants to organizations. Local residents Bill and Laura Grindle founded See Kids Dream in 2008 to help empower children to connect with their communities.

“To me, it’s about reaching kids and getting them engaged when they’re really young,” Mr. Grindle said. “It becomes part of who they are.” Penny Harvest was introduced during the 2008–2009 school year to seven elementary schools, four in Worthington and three in Columbus. Together, they raised a total of $15,114.66. The funds helped support a number of causes, from pediatric cancer and recycling, to animals and community crime patrols.

The year-long initiative is unique in that students are responsible for not only raising the funds, but making the decisions about where their money goes. They also participate in service projects that align with the causes.

Students gather pennies from October until December and then research local community needs. Once each school has determined its top causes, student leaders interview local organizations that provide services in those areas before selecting which nonprofits will receive grants. A $19,800 Columbus Foundation grant was awarded to support the expansion of the Penny Harvest program, which has grown to include 19 elementary schools, 10 in Worthington and 9 in Columbus. The money allowed See Kids Dream to hire a part-time consultant to assist with supporting the schools. The grant was made possible thanks to support from the J. Ray and Lillian W. Waller and the Richard C. and Nanciann Kaufman Ninde funds of The Columbus Foundation.

Devonshire Alternative Elementary kindergarten student Isaiah Carter displays his class’ portion of the Wheel of Caring. Each classroom identified one issue they were passionate about, and all were added to create a Wheel of Caring at the recent kickoff for the Penny Harvest program.
Devonshire Alternative Elementary raised more than $2,500 last year, and used their pennies to support City Year Columbus and Rails-to-Trails.

“Participating in the Penny Harvest program helps builds community within our school and allows us to come together around a common cause,” said Patricia Price, principal. “It helps kids think beyond themselves.”