Students debate ways to use small change to make a big impact

Tuesday, April 27, 2010

Destini Vann from Old Orchard Elementary helps Brian Barnett from the Community Kitchen as he responds to questions about homelessness.

"I agree people in Haiti need our help. Lots of people lost their homes and were hurt, but they can get their homes back. What about kids in Columbus who may lose their lives to cancer? They really need our help too and maybe even more than the people in Haiti."

This is just one example of the passionate opinions being expressed in classrooms, school libraries and cafeterias at elementary schools across Columbus and Worthington as students participate in a service learning program called the Penny Harvest.

Over 7,500 students ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade are participating in the program. Last fall the students went door-to-door and gathered more than 3 million pennies, for a grand total of $30,075.95! Now they are working hard to decide how they should give back every penny they collected.

Each week since last fall, students in each school meet and discuss how to address the community needs identified by the entire student body at their school. To help gain a deeper insight, many of the students have invited leaders from local non-profit organizations to come to their schools and participate in discussions. They are learning about the causes and ways to help address needs such as homelessness, poverty, child abuse, hunger, disaster relief and support for sick children and their families.

This is the second year of the program in central Ohio. It is provided to the schools by a local non-profit organization called See Kids Dream. The organization provides the training,
materials and support needed to run the Penny Harvest. They encourage and empower the students to act locally with the funds they raise.

This year many students expressed a strong desire to help address the needs Haitians who were affected by the recent devastating earthquake that left more than a million people homeless. In response to the students' requests, See Kids Dream partnered with Common Cents of New York -- the developers of the Penny Harvest -- and other organizations across the country that are running the program. Together they created an opportunity for the students nationally to collaborate and decide if they wanted to contribute a portion of the funds they raised locally to address the critical needs in Haiti.

Programs like the Penny Harvest engage students in their learning and use community service as an educational strategy. Research has shown that students who participate in programs like the Penny Harvest benefit from higher academic achievement, increased self esteem and the development of research, organization, communication and leadership skills.

"I am truly amazed by the insights expressed by these young citizens. They are learning through the process of engagement in the Penny Harvest. Their examples provide a valuable lesson to many adults in our community, about compassion and a desire to help that is truly inspirational," said Bill Grindle, See Kids Dream executive director.

See Kids Dream was able to expand from the seven schools who ran the Penny Harvest last year to a total of 19 schools this school year thanks to a grant from the Columbus Foundation’s J. Ray and Lillian W. Waller, Richard C. and Manikin Kaufman Ninde funds, support from Crimson Cup, Tehio Credit Union, Huntington Bank, and donations from individuals in our community.

The organization hopes the students' success will inspire support from other local donors to enable expansion to additional schools and districts in the future. "See Kids Dream does not charge schools for the support and materials they provide to run the Penny Harvest service learning program. Additional funding will be critical to maintain and expand the program," Grindle said. To learn more about See Kids Dream and how you can help bring the Penny Harvest to more schools and children in Columbus, visit www.SeeKidsDream.org.