

William E. Russell Elementary School: Students and Teachers Identify the Needs – and Work Together on Meeting Them

Physical education teacher Elizabeth Reynolds Lupo faced a challenge. Students at Russell Elementary School were having a difficult time keeping fit and eating right. The school is one of the poorest in the nation. A scarcity of space, indoors or outdoors, makes it difficult for students to stay physically active during school hours. When it rains, physical education classes must be held in cramped classrooms. A Title 1 school with 100 percent participation in the free and reduced lunch program, lunches are shipped in to Russell and re-heated in ovens before serving. Even for the most health-conscious student, it was tough to maintain energy balance.

But as school principal Tamara Blake points out: “No matter how limited our financial resources are, there are people who still believe in what we do.”

Blake and Lupo, with other members of the teaching staff, sought to deal with the fitness problem by involving students themselves in the solution. The school identified its needs in the area of energy balance through its school wellness council. Students meet weekly to discuss barriers to health within the school community, and to consider what impact the students can make to help alleviate these barriers. Students have created online polls to identify areas of need and potential solutions. The wellness council selected two priority areas for the school: Increasing physical activity and increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables.



Snapshot of William E. Russell Elementary

Community Snapshot	With a population as high as 120,000, Dorchester is Boston’s largest neighborhoods and one of its most diverse. Residents are 37% African American, 28% White, 14% Hispanic, 12% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 7% multiracial or from other cultures. Throughout its history, Dorchester has had periods of economic recession and revival. The Greater Boston Area is home to a number of technology companies and is a hub for biotechnology, with financial services, tourism, publishing and government also serving as major employers.
School Type	Public
Enrolment	369
Grade levels	K-5
School overview	William E. Russell Elementary is a school wide Title 1 School (for 2012-2013) with 100% student participation in its free and reduced price lunch programs. 58.5% of students are Hispanic, 25.5% are African American, 10.8% are Asian, 2.2% are white, and 3% are multi-racial or from other cultures.
How Physical Education and Health are taught	Physical Education classes are held once a week for 50 minutes.
FYBC Team	Tamara Blake, Principal Elizabeth Reynolds Lupo, P.E. Teacher Student-lead school wellness council

Background

Without a gymnasium for indoor physical activity, or leafy greens for school lunches, students of William E. Russell Elementary faced a tough challenge in meeting the need for energy balance. “We don’t have a lot of resources,” said physical education teacher Elizabeth Reynolds Lupo.

But they did have some advantages: a dedicated physical education teacher, a principal committed to the health of the school’s students, and a high level of awareness and determination among many of the students themselves. Together, they made it their mission to ensure greater opportunity for students to get and stay fit.

Identifying The Need

To identify the needs of the student body, administration and staff went right to the source: the students themselves. They launched a School Wellness Council consisting of students and staff that met weekly to discuss their community’s barriers to energy balance and how they might be reduced. Through polls and an online survey, the School Wellness Council students revealed two priority needs: fellow students were most concerned about the foods and exercise facilities unavailable in their school.

“The students definitely wanted fresh fruit and vegetables more often; and they definitely wanted more physical activities,” said Russell Elementary principal Tamara Blake.

Meeting the Need

With guidance from their physical education teacher and principal, students on the School Wellness Council focused on two priorities: Eating right and keeping physically fit. They took steps to eliminate the clear challenges confronting students at the school.

Creating a Garden

To improve opportunities for healthy eating, students resolved to create a community garden that would introduce new fruits and vegetables to the school. With fifth grade classes leading the way, students resolved to get the garden started by the spring of this year, with produce scheduled to be introduced into the school by the fall.

To help students keep physically active, the School Wellness Council is aggressively seeking to introduce ‘movement opportunities’ for students into the school day. That includes movement breaks during the school day and the addition of therapy ball chairs to a classroom. The Council also resolved to find unused space in the school building for physical education classes and for students to get a chance to move and keep physically fit.

In the fall of 2012, they developed an action plan to make the School Garden and Healthy Eating a reality. First, they fleshed out the concepts, and clarified the things they would have to do to make the garden a reality. They identified potential community partners, and sought to enlist their support. Not surprisingly, the oldest students – in Grade 5 – took a leading role. They helped design the garden beds and measured the area. Students in Grades 3-5 built garden beds in preparation for spring planting. Even the kindergarten kids helped out, using recycled materials to create biodegradable seed-starting materials.



The Grade 5 students then calculated seed starting dates based on the last predicted frost for the Boston area, and created a calendar setting out when each crop should be started. Kindergarten students then started the seeding based on the calendar, and all students joined in on tending to the seedlings. Students in Grades 3-5 opened the beds for spring planting,

and Grade 3 students created an irrigation system using rain barrels. All students planted seedlings and documented plant growth as part of sciences classes. So all students got a chance to help – and did their part.

The garden is truly a community project. In the summer of 2013, parents and partners in the community help maintain the garden – including planting during the summer – and they share in the benefits, receiving a portion of the produce.

In the fall, students will utilize the fall harvest in a classroom cooking project. Students will also use fibers and natural dyes from the garden in a colonial art project.

Not only does the garden generate harvest for the daily fruit snack program, but it also serves as a valuable opportunity for physical activity, increasing student activity to 60 minutes per day.

Encouraging Physical Activity

At the same time as planning and creating the garden, students also joined together to encourage and facilitate physical activity. Grade 5 students researched the benefits of exercise, creating a power point presentation highlighting the need for frequent movement during the day – presenting their findings to the wellness council and the principal.



Fourth grade students created movement breaks to be announced at morning breaks. Grade 2 students collected sample pedometer data, analyzing the data with the help of Grade 5 students. This fall, students will introduce therapy ball chairs to one classroom, and students will work with faculty and the principal to identify space for physical movement in the absence of a gym.

The Results

The results of Russell Elementary’s participation in the Challenge turned out to be extraordinary. Students significantly increased their daily amount of movement and enthusiastically participated in the community garden project.

Just as importantly, the students and staff of Russell Elementary were able to accomplish their healthy living goal without compromising their standard school curriculum. The garden provided countless opportunities for interactive projects in the school’s science, history, and art curriculum. “The Find Your Balance Challenge really gave us a way to incorporate it into our academics and make it a part of our day without taking away from what the students needed to learn,” said Reynolds Lupo. “We know that academics are very connected to health and wellness.”

Moving forward they will play a major role in measuring the results of the projects. They will track the number of successfully harvested crops in the garden, and conduct school-wide taste tests. They will also evaluate the pedometer tests to determine the effectiveness of the program to encourage physical movement.



The Community

One of the accomplishments that Russell Elementary's students are most proud of is their extensive work with community partners. Writing donation letters and grants were a large part of the students' strategy for obtaining seeds and funding for their proposed garden since the beginning of the project, and they were rewarded with significant support. By communication and joining forces with City Mission society, Russell Elementary was able to raise enough money to start funding their garden. They also worked with City Mission to implement a school wide field day in the fall in order to continue educating the student body on fun ways to stay active.

Russell Elementary students have also involved their parents in the project by offering them produce from the garden in exchange for their assistance maintaining it during the summer months when school is not in session.

The Impact of the Prize Money

As one of the poorest schools in the nation, the Russell Elementary's staff couldn't have appreciated the prize more. "We are in the business of educating every child, and given the financial deficit that a lot of schools, especially urban schools are confronted with, there's no way we would have been able to promote health and wellness had we not had the support" said Blake.

The prize money promises an exciting amount of change towards a healthier learning environment. "This money is going to be truly amazing for what we can do for our students," said Reynolds Lupo. Plans to make use of the financial support include:

- Installing new pipes and sinks in the cafeteria to prep produce
- Adding a permanent salad bar
- Soundproofing the auditorium and removing chairs to create a gymnasium
- Investing in heart rate monitors and pedometers – as well as an x-box system to get everyone moving

Lessons Learned

In addition to technical knowledge – such as how to seed and grow crops, harvest them, and track the results – students learned some valuable lessons about life: the value of working together, the importance of establishing a clearly-defined plan and following up on it, and the knowledge that a goal can be achieved if you care enough about it and are prepared to work toward it.

As Principal Blake says: "A lot of the perception is that elementary students cannot handle this level of work. But this is the legacy they are leaving behind for the students that come after them."

How to Replicate this Success in Your Community

Every school is different, but the *Find Your Balance Challenge* team at William E. Russell Elementary points to several key success factors to help other schools:

1. **Student-driven.** Don't shy away from looking to students to propose and implement solutions. While they may need some guidance and support, it's important to recognize students for their independent ingenuity and valuable insight in a way that also helps them to recognize it in themselves.
2. **Partner with the Community.** The support of local community businesses, parents and the rest of the school district was instrumental in supplying Russell Elementary with the funds, resources, and encouragement to implement substantial change in their school's health.
3. **Use the Resources.** The Energy Balance curriculum helps students establish connections between lesson objectives and health, according to Reynolds Lupo. "We used the Grade 3-5 *What is Energy Balance?* lesson plan to highlight

the concept of balance and how to balance your body. It was helpful for the students to connect a concrete concept like balancing an object on their head with balancing their daily caloric input and output.”

4. **Leave a Legacy.** Create a plan that results in positive and long-lasting change. “A lot of the perception is that elementary students cannot handle this level of work,” Blake said of the wellness council and the garden. “But this is the legacy they are leaving behind for the students that come after them.”
5. **Make a Detail-Oriented Action Plan.** While your plan should be an overarching, long-term approach to solving energy balance problems, make sure to know the specific details that are important to your team’s goals. Create a comprehensive outline of the steps you need to accomplish, as well as how and when they must be done to achieve the best results.



Watch the William E. Russell video case study at [TogetherCounts.com](https://www.togethercounts.com)