

Kids use 'American Voice' to aid classmates

Want medical physicals available for everyone

By JUDY MASTERSON jmasterson@stmedianetwork.com

ROUND LAKE -- Students at Magee Middle School decided it was wrong that some of their classmates were prevented from playing school sports, and they decided to do something about it.

The 15 Round Lake-area students, participants in the after-school Our American Voice project, are learning how to use the process of civic engagement to ensure that all students who want a school sports physical can receive one. They have enlisted the help of community groups, including B.E.S.T. and Mano a Mano Family Resource Center, as well as health care providers like Wal-mart Acute Care and Advocate Condell Medical Center to offer medical examinations to Round Lake district students at more convenient times and places -- like during a back-to-school kermes or carnival to be held July 25 at Round Lake High School.



Magee Middle School students (sitting, from left) Ashley Wegner, seventh grade, Nicole Bihn, counselor, Katie Alvarez, seventh grade, (standing) Cindy Om, seventh grade, Kayla Smythe, sixth grade, and Alphy Moreno, seventh grade, discuss the Our American Voice program. (Michael Schmidt/News-Sun)

"Our hope is when families come in to school to register students, they would just walk into the next room to get a physical," said Nicole Bihn, a guidance counselor who is leading the group.

Students like Magee eighth-grader Faith Gazdzicki are brainstorming how to bring doctors and other health professionals directly to the school.

"Some parents are working and don't have the time or money to take kids to the doctor," Gazdzicki said. "We want to make it low- or no-cost to the students."

Other barriers to school physicals include lack of transportation and a shortage of doctors who will accept patients under the state's KidCare program.

Magee and Round Lake Middle School OAV groups are among 13 others in the Chicagoland area that are learning to bring positive change through active, engaged citizenship. The Magee group recently asked for support for their idea at a Youth Empowerment Summit, a program of the Lake County After School Coalition, and they will make a presentation at the second annual OAV Summit on Friday at U.S. Cellular Field in Chicago.

"These kids are tackling problems that are real in their communities," said Sheila Smith, president of the Barat Foundation, which funds the OAV.

program. "They're taking control, using their critical thinking skills, researching an issue, learning how to frame the issue in a media age and coming up with a solution."

The OAV group at Round Lake Middle School is pushing for more sidewalks, another group is working to prevent bullying and another is creating a school cooperative for families that struggle to afford school supplies.

"These are wonderfully hopeful projects and so important because I believe our future depends on our ability to properly engage students and adults in this 21st century world we live in," Smith said.

Expanding access to school physicals could have other positive impacts, including a healthier student body and increased academic achievement. Magee Principal Eric Gallagher estimated that for every sport, six students want to play, but can't. He said the district understands that the success of many students hinges on the strength of their connection to school. In recognition of that fact, the athletic participation fee has been lowered from \$50 to \$15, beginning next school year.

"Sports teams or other school activities give kids a sense of belonging," Gallagher said.

Xavian Casas, 12, said his involvement in OAV at Magee has helped him learn to participate and speak out. He wants to continue to find ways to include more students in the life of the school, including opening participation in community service projects that are often reserved for club members.

More kids need "a chance to shine in their own way," Casas said.

Gazdzicki hopes to use her new civic skills to offer students alternatives to gangs.

"We've learned we do have a voice in our community and that we can get changes made," she said. Magee Middle School.