

MAHWAH'S FOURTH AND FIFTH GRADE STUDENTS RUN MILES

Recess program keeps students in shape



Fifth grader Emilia Calabrese runs a lap around the playground.



Fourth grader Anthony Ascencio proudly sports his necklace with numerous charms for his Mileage Club achievements.

When Emilia Calabrese started fourth grade at Joyce Kilmer School, she suffered from asthma. Fast forward to today and the fifth grader no longer has asthma, crediting her improved breathing to the nearly 124 miles she has run as a member of the school's Mileage Club.

"I have run over 1,239 laps on the playground or 123.9 miles," she said. "Running is so good for you, just such great exercise. When I run, it helps me keep in better shape and I have gotten rid of my asthma."

Emilia is one of the fourth and fifth grade students at Joyce Kilmer Elementary School in Mahwah who spend their recess two days a week running laps around the playground. "Emilia's lungs are stronger, and she has improved her lung capacity," said Health & Physical Education Teacher Dena Scudieri, the advisor for the school's Mileage Club.

Each lap around the playground is 1/10 of a mile so students understand that they need to run 10 laps for each mile, Scudieri said. The fifth graders ran a total of 2,939 miles (about the width of the United States) over the past two years. This year's fourth graders have so far run more than 1,049 miles (about the distance from Florida to New York City).

The club started more than 10 years ago and has been supported by the school's Home & School Organization (HSO), she said. The HSO has purchased incentives for the program such as small necklace charms and chains to hold them.

Years ago, when the program first started, "we would have a bucket of tongue depressor sticks and would take one for every lap completed," Scudieri said.

At the end of recess, a recess paraprofessional would record the student laps by counting the number of tongue depressors each student had accumulated. "This was extremely time-consuming," Scudieri said. "About three or four years ago, the company Fitness Finders created an app that digitally tracks progress. The online app is on our iPad and tracks the number of laps/miles that each student completes through a QR code scanner. Each student has a QR code printed and attached to the back of their lunch card."

For every mile completed, the students are awarded incentives (charms) at the end of physical education class, she said. “The online program we use is called www.ez mileageclub.com and it is very easy to manage,” she said. “I have set up a system where we have special charms for signature number of laps starting at 100 laps/10 miles! The program keeps track of many different stats such as monthly totals, top class, top students by grade, top 25 and top 50 overall.”

“The program has been quite a success,” said Scudieri, who said she hopes that the club “helps foster a love of running and prepares kids for the district’s track and cross-county teams.”

The club meets every Monday and Tuesday during recess, weather permitting, from October through the end of the school year. Students can check statistics on a bulletin board.

Running also clears her mind and helps her perform better in school, Emilia said. About 95 percent of the school’s students participate. After the first mile, students receive a mileage club mood pencil.

Fourth grader Anthony Ascencio proudly sports his necklace with numerous charms for his Mileage Club achievements. “I feel happy when I run,” he said. “It relieves stress when I have a test.”

The 2023-24 school year was the first year that Scudieri was able to continue recording the number of laps for fifth graders that were earned in fourth grade, she said. “We have a few students in fifth grade who are now up over 1,000 laps! We also have monthly-seasonal challenges. Our 30 or so top lap students earn a seasonal charm for that month. The month of November was our Turkey Trot challenge for a turkey charm. February was the Winter Challenge – top students earned the snowflake charm. We are currently in our May Madness Mileage Challenge. Our top lap students will earn a flower charm!”