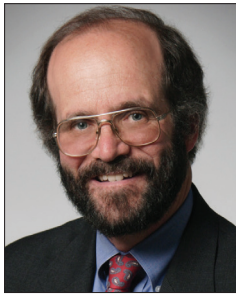




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## Healthy Classrooms Foundation: An Effective Model for Medical Student Public Health Engagement

Minaliza Shahlapour, Helen Zukin, and Robert N. Golden, MD

After participating in a school-wide gardening program, a middle school student told his teacher that this was the first time he realized food did not simply come from a chain convenience store. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated story. Wisconsin educators have shared many similar iterations of students' health-related knowledge gaps and can identify the painful lack of basic resources that can guide students toward healthy lives.

Statistics show that fewer than a quarter of Wisconsin's children have access to 60 minutes of structured physical activity per day, while 70% are in front of a screen for at least 1 or more hours. Sadly, 6% of teens have not had a serving of fruit in the past week, yet 19% of them consume at least 1 sugary drink each day.<sup>1</sup> Wisconsin's statewide child obesity rate is 14.8%, which doubles to 30.7% for

Wisconsin adults.<sup>2</sup> These statistics clearly demonstrate the need to teach young people skills for healthy living before adulthood in an effort to decrease the obesity epidemic and future comorbidities.

as the creation of health-promoting clubs, classroom meditation, and yoga electives, as well as a student-run mental health resource fair.

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### Healthy Classrooms Foundation

There are practical limits to how much education physicians can deliver to their young patients during clinic visits. The largest limitation is the fact that most kids see their doctor no more than once a year. However, children spend the majority of their time at school, where educators can serve as experts in understanding and addressing the health needs of their students. The Healthy Classrooms Foundation (HCF) works to recruit educators as public health allies and provides them with grants to carry out initiatives such

created by medical students at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH) in 2008 and gained 501(c)3 status on March 10, 2009. The founders—Ben Weston, MPH '10, MD '11, and Shaun Yang, MD '10—shared a vision of building a bridge that would connect medical students with the community and “bring public health to the public.” Inspired by the teachings and actions of the faculty at the SMPH, the organization's mission is simple yet ambitious: to integrate public health initiatives, in the domains of physical, emotional, and mental health, as well as environmental respon-

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sibility, into Wisconsin's primary and secondary school systems.

More than a decade ago, the UW Medical School began its transformation into the nation's first school of medicine and public health.<sup>3</sup> A cornerstone of this transformation—including the school's name change to the UW

better. Then, once those initial changes occur, the results snowball.”

Another avenue for community engagement is the annual HCF Public Health Symposium that takes place each spring at the Health Sciences Learning Center, where the SMPH is located. The symposium is free and open to the pub-

lic, serving to facilitate community discussion. It engages community members in informative talks and interactive sessions that focus on promoting youth physical, emotional, and mental health, as well as environmental responsibility.

in community engagement and public health work. Public health leadership opportunities like the Healthy Classrooms Foundation should be ingrained in all medical student curricula, training future physicians to think beyond the clinic walls and focus on the larger well-being of the community.<sup>5</sup>

## In the past decade, the Healthy Classrooms Foundation has awarded more than \$100,000 to educators across Wisconsin.

School of Medicine and Public Health—was the commitment to emphasize the ideals of community responsiveness and a duty to serve the state in the training of the next generation of physicians.

### Medical Student/Community Partnerships

One ideal that is emphasized throughout the SMPH's curriculum is the importance of community partnerships.<sup>4</sup> This approach is embodied in HCF grant awards. These grants are aimed at first-time grant applicants and are typically between \$1,000 and \$3,000. The HCF's small grants can provide an educator with a great opportunity to pilot an initiative within their own classroom, and potentially leverage that pilot project into sustainable, ongoing support from within the school's own district and/or other external sources. Although the grants often are “starters,” they have the potential to spark tremendous impact and promote public health leadership among teachers.

In the past decade, the HCF has awarded more than \$100,000 to educators across Wisconsin. Follow-up surveys suggest that more than 80% of the school projects funded between 2010 and 2016 are still ongoing, with the majority of programs impacting at least 100 students per school (Shahlapour and Zukin, unpublished data). One recipient eloquently stated, “The type of support that the Healthy Classrooms Foundation provides functions like a micro-lending project. Their support always seems to provide just enough incentive to encourage our school community to implement changes for the

lic, serving to facilitate community discussion. It engages community members in informative talks and interactive sessions that focus on promoting youth physical, emotional, and mental health, as well as environmental responsibility.

### Learning for Leadership

The Healthy Classrooms Foundation is led by a board of directors that is largely comprised of first- through fourth-year medical students. Additional community board members include Dr Weston, one of the foundation's founders; Susan Manning, JD, an attorney; and Jay Affeldt, director of mental, behavioral, and physical health for the Madison School District.

By participating in HCF, medical students apply concepts taught in the classroom, gaining valuable public health and leadership experience. The organization further benefits the students who serve on its board, as described by HCF alumni who are currently in practice. Past board members characterize their involvement as promoting leadership skills and the value of community engagement.

### Future Vision

The HCF Board is enthusiastic about expanding the organization's impact to underserved and rural portions of the state. New efforts are underway to involve students from other disciplines throughout the UW-Madison campus and to grow additional funding sources.

At the national level, the Healthy Classrooms Foundation hopes to serve as a model for other medical schools interested in empowering medical students to participate

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