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Students walking to meet Mrs. Michelle

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Thea Henry-Hamilton welcomed youngsters as they walked onto the John Gill Elementary School's Redwood City campus Tuesday morning and onto the basketball court.

The purple-haired mom set up clipboards with the names of teachers and the students in their classes on the fence while kids dropped off their bags and began to walk around the yellow line that circles the basketball court. She started the timer when kids wanted to race and encouraged the kids to chase the teachers who joined in the fun. Twelve times around the court is a mile. Not all children complete 12 in the 15 to 20 minutes before school starts, but they use the time to get in a little exercise before sitting in a desk.



Heather Murtagh/Daily Journal
Stephanie logs her 10 laps Tuesday morning as part of the Morning Momentum program at John Gill Elementary School in Redwood City. Students log their laps and combine the distance in hopes of traveling to the White House to "visit" Michelle Obama.

"The point is to get their brains started," said Principal Amanda Kemp.

Thus far, the students have traveled a combined 2,160 miles without leaving the blacktop. Ultimately, they hope to collectively walk 2,400 miles, the equivalent distance to walk to the White House, to "visit" with the first lady.

"Mrs. Michelle lives at the White House," said 8-year-old Jesus.

The second-grade student was one of the first to start rounding the court Tuesday morning and was on his 11th lap by the time the masses started to show.

Creating a walking goal for the group started after Henry-Hamilton attended a lecture about the benefits of exercise. She approached Kemp and got started.

Around January, the effort began by giving older kids pedometers, a device that counts a person's steps. But the devices weren't always accurate and sometimes were lost or ended up going through the wash. Instead, the before-class option of walking the basketball court and having kids mark their own laps became the way to go. Students receive a medal with the John Gill colors for starting and a little golden winged-foot pin to add to the medal for each five miles completed.

With a walking area set, the kids needed a goal. Walking to Sacramento seemed too easy, but the idea of walking together to visit Michelle Obama, who has actively campaigned against childhood obesity, seemed like a better fit, said Henry-Hamilton.

Efforts were boosted by an all-school fundraiser called the Move-A-Thon on May 14, where students spent an hour moving around campus. Their efforts were beneficial physically, but also earned cash to help fund physical education on campus.

Parent Deena Evans who helped with the Move-A-Thon noted how kids were able to choose how much they wanted to do. As the day progressed, Evans recalled seeing younger children high-fiving the older ones as they completed laps around the campus.

The event counted toward the school's Washington, D.C. goal, adding 1,100 miles to map in the front office.

Starting in Redwood City, a white line spans most of the country on a map ending in Washington, D.C., where a White House sticker was placed. Star and little shoe stickers are added to the lines as kids progress closer.

"We're almost there," little ones said while passing the map in the office Tuesday morning.

One little boy had a better question, "How will we get back?" he said noting how far away Washington D.C. is from

the Bay Area.

That's the beauty of it all, explained Henry-Hamilton, by adding all our work together we can accomplish something we couldn't really do alone. We couldn't really walk all that way, it'd be hard, and dangerous, she said.

With only 240 miles to go, the kids are confident their goal will be reached by school's end in four weeks. Henry-Hamilton is hoping to get a letter from the White House to share with their kids after completing the 2,400-mile journey. A video message would be even better, she said.

Students were excited about the goal, but also about the personal accomplishment from participating.

Ten-year-old Carlos, who completed about half a mile Tuesday, noted the walking was good exercise. Evan, who is almost 7, said it was fun to run and noted how quickly the group is progressing across the map.

John Gill is still accepting donations for the Move-A-Thon, which can be made at <http://moveathon.johngillpta.org>.

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