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Harris School students benefit from new Hess Park walking path

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By VALERIE WELLS - H&R Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, September 25, 2009 11:30 pm | No Comments Posted

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Harris School students and faculty members take a morning stroll on the new walking path in Hess Park. (Herald & Review/Kelly J. Huff)

DECATUR - Elizabeth Mounts pronounced Wednesday's weather "perfect" for using the new walking path at Harris School.

"It's not too hot, and it's not too cold," she said.

The new path is a cooperative effort between Harris School and the Decatur Park District. The school received a \$5,000 grant from Illinois Action for Healthy Kids, and the park district matched it, to pave a path in Hess Park that's three-tenths of a mile long.

Coupled with the path that was already there, physical education teacher Scott Godfrey said, the whole walk is about half a mile.

"We decided we wanted a walking path," he said. "We wanted to open some doors for the special education students out here. Before, all the teachers would be pushing wheelchairs through the grass. Plus, it's a good way to get the general education kids out on the track."

Because Harris is all on one level, many of the elementary students in the Macon-Piatt Special Education District attend classes there, and the park next door to the school serves as playground for all the students.

"Every one of my classes runs on (the path)," Godfrey said, and his words were proven true a few moments later as one after another, children jogged up to a nearby tree and dropped to the grass to rest. "We run one lap. It's been great. The kids enjoy it, and so far, it's been good for everybody."

Godfrey is anxious to instill good, lifelong habits in his students, and having the park handy plus the walking track helps him do that.

"It helps the kids realize all you need is an area to run for lifelong fitness," he said. "A lot of the kids are neighborhood kids, and it kind of opens their eyes to (the fact that) this is always here, and it's never closed."

Principal Kathy Thompson said she's seen adults from the neighborhood use it, too, and fourth-grader Elizabeth, along with her friends Janiya Deberry and Ariana Wilson, who live in the area, said they often use it outside of school hours.

"I love it," Elizabeth said. "I just love it because it's very, very fun. I come here every day."

Thompson is hopeful that a donor will appear who can help them pay for asphalt paving of the track, which is now paved with a limestone mix. With asphalt, she said, it would be even easier for the children who use wheelchairs and walkers.

"I think it's real nice because you can exercise, and some people that's out of shape and need to run around and stuff can be healthy and get stronger," Janiya said.

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