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Educating Downtown youth on hunger epidemics

The Action Center to End World Hunger, the educational and global engagement division of Mercy Corps, is educating the next generation of New Yorkers to help tackle the global hunger crisis. The Center, whose Downtown Manhattan office opened in Fall 2008, has cultivated partnerships with P.S. 89, The Little Red School House and Elisabeth Erwin High School and Stuyvesant High School, with the hope to expand its program to other schools in Lower Manhattan.

The school's P.S. 89 program, "Hangout for Change," consists of a weekly workshop session for the school's 3rd through 5th graders at the Center. Guest speakers, such as Mercy Corps field workers and a New York City Coalition Against Hunger coordinator, teach students about the global and local causes and ramifications of food shortages.

Seven or eight student volunteers from Stuyvesant High School, nicknamed "Community Gardeners," venture to the center every Friday to work on composting and gardening in the Center's two plots in Battery Park City.

"They learn about global nutritional issues and the importance of local farming," said Sarah Bever, education officer at the Center.

The Center has also forged an informal partnership with the Little Red School House and Elisabeth Erwin High School, conducting workshops with the school's human rights classes.

It has also overseen public service learning projects with three Brooklyn public schools, and has formed semester-long partnerships with some 65 other schools in New York City and the tri-state area.

Workshop discussions address topics like war conflicts in Afghanistan, land rights in Guatemala, and misgovernance in Indonesia. All of them have a negative effect on food distribution, Bever explained.

"One of the things we look at is the role that government regulations play in having adequate social services," she said.

Most historians and contemporary anti-hunger experts agree that the laissez-faire attitude adopted by the British government contributed to the spread of the Potato Famine in the mid-1800s.

“It isn’t just about food. It’s about politics...” Irish President Mary McAleese said at the May 23 Irish Hunger Memorial commemoration event. “It’s about taking people and robbing their social civic contribution by robbing them of their dignity and opportunity,” she added.

Local city officials are getting in on the action to lessen hunger epidemic in New York City. In addition to initiatives introduced by City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer released a report, “FoodNYC: A Blueprint for a Sustainable Food System,” to reform the city’s policies regarding the production, distribution and consumption of food. It includes proposals to make the city’s food system more sustainable by prioritizing local produce and making healthy food more available in underserved neighborhoods.

On a national scale, President Obama has pledged to end child hunger in America by 2015 with the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which would allocate \$4.5 billion to youth nutrition programs over the next decade.

If you are a teacher interested in the Action Center’s educational outreach programs, please contact Sarah Bever at education@actioncenter.org or call the Center at 212-537-0512.