

WHEN ARE WE GOING TO TEACH HEALTH?

LET'S TEACH HEALTH AS IF EACH CHILD'S
LIFE DEPENDS ON IT—BECAUSE IT DOES

DUNCAN VAN DUSEN



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CASE STUDY

Parents in Action—GROW Central Florida

A parent grows from being a solo volunteer to starting an organization to train and mobilize other parents to support health programs in schools.

The story of Colleen Gonzalez and GROW Central Florida began modestly enough. In 2009, after a decade of experience in corporate human resources, Gonzalez left her job to become a stay-at-home mom. Seeking to become more involved in her child's Seminole County, Florida school, she started volunteering to help with health programming. By 2015, her work had evolved to coaching and organizing other parent volunteers. That year, she founded GROW Central Florida, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit whose acronym stands for Grass Roots Outreach Within. A public school parent-outreach organization, GROW works to promote environments that support increased opportunities for physical activity

and healthy living for Central Florida schoolchildren by partnering with grassroots volunteers and unfunded school health and wellness programs. By 2018, running GROW had become Gonzalez's full-time job.

As of 2020, GROW boasts a \$150,000 annual budget, mobilizes more than 80 volunteers at 47 schools, and reaches approximately 13,500 elementary school kids per year through several programs. The organization is proof that motivated parents can drive health education by thinking outside the usual bounds of simply asking for more dollars and minutes for it.

Action and Impact

Not impressed with "PTAs having cookie sales," Gonzalez began observing what was happening at other area schools. Some had running clubs, so she offered to start a before-school cross-country club at Lake Orienta Elementary School. The school initially declined the offer but let her arrange for student participation in National Walk-to-School Day and a monthly "Walk & Roll" program. Gonzalez's efforts proved so successful and Gonzalez so trustworthy that the next year, the school did allow her to create a student running club. The first year, 40 runners enrolled, and more than one hundred participated in its second year.

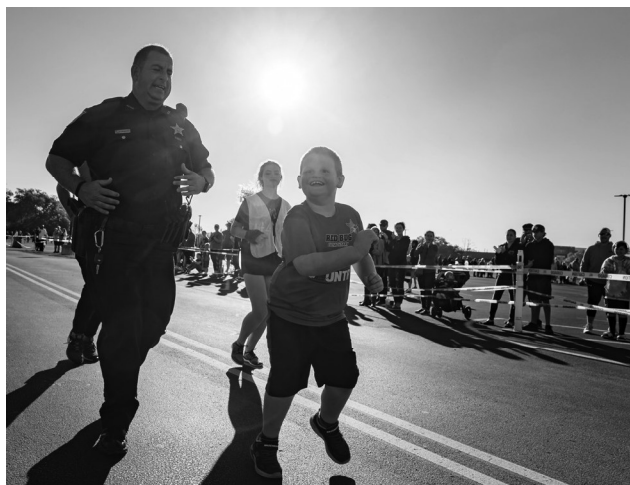


Teamwork! (Photograph by Eric Padgett. Used with permission.)

Today, supporting volunteer running coaches and unfunded teams is GROW Central Florida's signature service. As of the 2019–2020 school year, the running program has grown to include participation by all of Seminole County's 37 public elementary schools and two charter schools, reaching a total of 5,618 kids ages five to twelve who train with 74 volunteer coaches. GROW also supported volunteer race directors who held nine meets with a total of 8,500 runners. GROW volunteers help organize the schedule and awards ceremony and the GROW organization provides the logistical support for event management as well as durable goods such as loudspeakers and flags bought with donations. In a before-and-after survey the same year, 564 parents of running club members reported that as a result of participating, their children had increased their daily physical activity by an average of 21 minutes (from 58 to 79 minutes per child per day), with all children getting at least 30 minutes of exercise per day.

According to the parents, the emotional impact of GROW's program has been as significant as its physical impact. Parent Janine Morse says:

I love this organization! My son, who has autism, participated in Runner's Club for the first time this year at school, and I was hesitant about letting him participate in the races because I thought he would get upset if he could not keep up with the other kids. I am so thankful that his PE teacher, Coach Segrest, encouraged me to let him participate in the races and reassured me that she would run with him so he would not be by himself. Landon loved participating in all the races and was so happy when he beat Coach Segrest across the finish line.



Landon Morse runs in a GROW-sponsored race with a School Resource Deputy (Photograph by GROW Central Florida. Used with permission.)

As an extension of this program, GROW began providing shoes for students in need of proper athletic footwear. A collaboration with Fleet Feet Orlando, a local shoe retailer, initially yielded donations of 20 to 30 pairs at a time. GROW Central Florida and Fleet Feet Orlando were later spotlighted at a Fleet Feet corporate meeting, which inspired footwear companies New Balance and Balega Socks to arrange for GROW to receive more than one thousand pairs of their merchandise. To maximize outreach, GROW has arranged for school principals, social workers, teachers, coaches, and school resource deputies (sworn law enforcement officers) to request shoes for the students they serve.

GROW has also partnered with law enforcement staff to distribute a variety of sports balls to children and teens in low-income communities. In 2019, this program gave out 830 balls, including basketballs donated by Orlando Magic and soccer balls provided by the Orlando City Soccer Club and the Orlando Pride. GROW emblazoned many of the balls with empowering messages such as, "YOU GOT THIS," or "YOU ARE STRONG!" The balls also provide a vehicle for law enforcement officers to interact with youth in the community and help foster a positive relationship among these kids and trusted adult role models. The balls program thus serves as a vehicle for increasing physical activity, promoting social and emotional health, and supporting public safety all at the same time.

Thanks to cash and in-kind gifts from its supporters,

GROW provides other community services as well, including school playground renovations (with seven projects completed through 2019), donations of toys for school recess, and loans of materials for family-centered athletic events.

Challenges, Lessons, and Opportunities

The key to GROW's growth? According to Gonzalez, it's slowly and steadily building trust with schools, teachers, parents, and other community partners such as local businesses. A blessing and a curse of this process is the regular turnover among parents, whose kids graduate and move, and school administrators who retire or switch schools or jobs. New volunteers and principals need time to learn about GROW's work and how they can contribute to it, and then may be productive for only a couple of years before they are gone and the cycle begins anew. This means a constant loss of enthusiastic supporters and difficulty institutionalizing programs within schools, but it also provides an opportunity for a constant influx of new ideas and energy.

Another challenge: Almost all of the available donations from schools, volunteers, and even corporate partners are in-kind rather than monetary, requiring GROW to be especially resourceful. For example, GROW reminds schools to apply for grants that will cover the cost of items needed during the school year for running club or recess. GROW also facilitates collaboration among school PTAs and running clubs in hosting multi-school

events, guiding them in what to expect and whom to call for help. To deliver needed supplies to schools efficiently and without direct cost, GROW has secured permission to use the school district's courier service. Gonzalez has also nurtured a culture of frugality among volunteers—for example, sharing equipment rather than buying it.

For Gonzalez, transitioning from doing everything herself to empowering other parents to lead activities has been a challenge but also a powerful opportunity. She marshalled her background in organizational behavior to recruit volunteers, to develop training materials and best practices, and to make it easy for parents to contribute to GROW's efforts without having to “reinvent the wheel” through trial and error. Increasingly, she sees GROW's mission as not just serving kids but also “taking parents that are green and teaching and developing them.” In fact, GROW has become so successful as a volunteer-development organization that it now involves high school students as volunteer “action agents” who help promote community health through various projects and local events.

GROW Central Florida's accomplishments over the past 11 years have led to many trophies and awards, including the Seminole Association of School Administrators 2019–2020 Community Partner of the Year award, Florida Blue Foundation's 2017 Sapphire Award Recognizing Excellence and Innovation in Community Health, and Action for Healthy Kids' Healthy Hero Award and designation as a National Parent Ambassador. And the

woman who started it all? Gonzalez was named one of *Orlando Magazine's* 2020 Women of the Year.

Health Education Theory in Practice

Although GROW is neither academically designed nor evaluated, the organization's programs put into practice many important elements of health education theory.

For example, it has leveraged DOI (see chapter 5) by engaging with early adopters and thought leaders first while steadily building trust to enable a wider reach over time. Whereas at the beginning, Gonzalez needed to slowly build credibility for herself as an individual, the goodwill she enjoys now extends to GROW Central Florida as an organization. That, in turn, means that any new volunteer brought on does not need to start from scratch in terms of status; thanks to the organization's reputation, he or she can become trusted and productive quickly. Another DOI principle, that not all leaders are found in high places with the biggest titles, rings true for GROW. True to the "grass roots" in its name, GROW has focused on developing healthy children by mobilizing energy and willingness from the ground up.

GROW's work also applies SCT (see chapter 5) extensively. Its brand of teaching health is clearly not about telling but showing. Adult volunteers run with the kids, and officers play ball with them. This dynamic even extends to Gonzalez's interaction with parents. Through hands-on involvement, she not only models the skills

needed to perform various tasks, but also provides moral authority by inspiring volunteers with a positive attitude and what she calls a "servant's heart." GROW supports environmental and social dimensions of health, both key components of behavior learning. It addresses the physical environment of health through distributing shoes and refurbishing playgrounds to make them more visually appealing, and the social environment of health by loaning equipment and offering technical assistance for family-centered events. Finally, GROW's work with student leaders adds a dimension of youth empowerment, which reinforces health behavior skills and attitudes by having kids demonstrate them to others.

The author would like to express his appreciation to Colleen Gonzalez's daughter, Morgan Gonzalez, an 18-year-old aspiring writer, for her valuable assistance in fact-checking and editing this case study. To learn more about GROW Central Florida, donate to support their work, or purchase activity equipment from their "wish list," visit www.growcentralflorida.org.