

## U.S. gives school a clean bill of health

Southwest Side charter's stress on wellness and environmentalism earns it a national honor

By Monica Eng, Tribune Reporter

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Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan, right, smells fresh basil as she is given a tour by first graders Amelia McCabe left, and Leila Bensaed, both 6, at the Academy of Global Citizenship located at 4647 W. 47th Street in Chicago. (Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune)

Could the Southwest Side be quietly hosting the healthiest school in the Midwest?

If you judge by a prestigious federal award program, it very well might.

Tuesday morning the Academy of Global Citizenship, nestled in the shadow of Midway Airport, received the U.S. Department of Agriculture's highest honor in its HealthierUS Schools Challenge — the first ever awarded in the Midwest.

Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan flew in to tour the school's organic garden, attend a morning yoga class, join the kids for an organic oatmeal breakfast and present AGC with the department's "Gold With Distinction" award to recognize its many achievements in health and nutrition.

Although the 3-year-old charter school technically operates under the Chicago Public Schools system, its health practices diverge dramatically from those of most schools in the district.

For starters, the whole school gets daily recess and daily physical education. The organic, made-from-scratch meal program includes dishes like macaroni and "trees," organic soy milk, kale crisps and teriyaki tempeh stir fry — not zesty taco meat with corn chips.

The students tend backyard chickens and an organic garden full of squash, arugula, tomatoes, eggplants and quinoas. And all their food waste gets composted with each meal.

For fundraisers, kids sell organic plants and reusable bags, not candy. And lessons on wellness and environmentalism are wrapped into nearly every subject of the school's International Baccalaureate candidate curriculum.

All these points were essential to the school's high marks in the USDA program. And their divergence from regular CPS practices makes the district's goal of gaining "gold" certification for 100 of its schools in three years seem awfully ambitious. Scant recess, once-a-week physical education and candy fundraisers are still standard practice at most district schools.

When addressing the student body of kindergartners to third-graders, Merrigan explained that her boss, Barack Obama, and first lady Michelle Obama were "really interested in kids' health and well being. ... So they asked me to head out to Chicago and celebrate the work you are doing together."

Executive Director Sarah Elizabeth Ippel's school had been operating under many of the program's guidelines for its three-year existence. But it was only in the last year, when the HealthierUS Schools Challenge was relaunched as part of the first lady's "Let's Move" program, that she thought to apply.

The Cambridge graduate says that "the values of the HealthierUS Schools Challenge resonate deeply with our commitment to ensuring that our future leaders are equipped to make healthy and sustainable choices for themselves, our community and our planet."

As a charter, AGC operates unencumbered by many district regulations, but it also relies heavily on fundraising. During Merrigan's visit, Ippel unveiled plans to expand the school with new facilities including an orchard, a barn and 10 acres of agricultural land by 2014. The fundraising goal for it: \$30 million.

Unfazed by the challenge, Ippel says she hopes elements of her school move the district in a healthier direction and "serve as a model to be replicated across CPS and even the rest of the country."