

A Sign of Schoolwide Inclusion

Elementary students learn, connect in sign language club

When the clock struck 8:05 on this chilly Thursday morning, the art room was by far the quietest in Bellerive Elementary. While you could hear hardly a sound, there was plenty of conversation.

The Bellerive American Sign Language Club was already hard at work reviewing the hundreds of words that members have learned to sign in just four meetings. These students are learning the fundamentals of American Sign Language as part of a club activity that takes place before the school day even officially begins.

“It kind of blew our minds that kids were willing to come to school an hour early to do this in such large numbers,” said Mickey Schuchardt, an SSD sign language interpreter at Bellerive Elementary in Parkway Schools.

“They’re really so excited about it, and of course we’re excited that they are, too,” she added.

Schuchardt and SSD sign language interpreter Elizabeth Murray co-sponsor this club, which includes a beginner’s level and an advanced-level class. The club is one of the most popular at the school and has never had fewer than 30 students involved.

“The beginner’s sign language class begins with conversational signs and areas like school-specific signs, signs they could use at home and various ways they could communicate with their peers here at Bellerive,” Murray said.

The club was actually formed because of student demand.

“We’ve had a deaf and hard of hearing program here at Bellerive for 30 years now, and this club came about because students would ask, ‘Hey, how can I say...’ in sign language,” Schuchardt said. “They would ask a lot and soon a principal came to us and told us that the students asked if they could have a sign language club.”

“I love it and it puts a big smile on my face,” Murray said. “They know they have to be quiet in the hallways, so they sign to us and it’s a joy to see them actually use their signs outside of the club.”



Students participate in the sign language club at Bellerive Elementary School.

Now that so many students have participated in the club, you can see American Sign Language being used throughout the building.

“Now we have various adults who want to learn to sign and communicate with their students,” Murray said. “We’ve even had staff from the cafeteria come to ask us how to sign so that they can communicate with students as they move through the lines.”

“American Sign Language is just something that is schoolwide; it’s normal here,” Schuchardt said.

For students who are receiving special education services from the deaf and hard of hearing program, seeing that American Sign Language has been embraced by the entire community is the ultimate demonstration of the school’s commitment to inclusion.

“Young kids are so perceptive,” Schuchardt said. “They know that this is not the same at other schools where their friends may attend, and they are so excited that people are embracing and appreciating their language.”

“When all the adults and all of their friends are validating their language, we think that’s something to celebrate.” ■

STUDENTS GIVE BACK THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECT



Hazelwood West and Hazelwood Central high school students in SSD's Community Based Vocational Instruction (CBVI) program at Mednik-Riverbend participate in Project Warmup.

Hazelwood West and Hazelwood Central high school students in SSD's Community Based Vocational Instruction (CBVI) program at Mednik-Riverbend are not only learning appropriate work behaviors and specific work skills, they're also a big part of Project Warmup, a grass-roots effort to get warm blankets free-of-charge out to the St. Louis homeless community.

CBVI, a program designed for students with disabilities during their last two years of school, expands vocational training opportunities to community-based sites where the students can learn in a naturally occurring environment.

Mednik-Riverbend, which manufactures a comprehensive line of absorbing products, has been a CBVI partner for two years. The company owner, Rick Wolf, believes in providing students with a wide variety of job training skills, and making them socially conscious.

Project Warmup began when Wolf started receiving phone calls from people who knew that he and his company were service oriented. Some of those calls were from local shelters who asked if they could get blankets for the homeless. That's when Wolf decided to give students in the CBVI program an opportunity to be a part of giving back to the community.

"It's been such a positive experience," said Wolf. "The kids sort the blankets, fold them and put them in bags with handles so that people can carry them in their cars and food vehicles, and when they see someone standing on the street, they can give them a blanket. There's an SSD logo on the bag that the students put on. It's been a win-win-win-win situation."

Wolf's own experiences as a father of three children with disabilities led him to believe that small businesses should do more to help individuals with disabilities.

Denise Inman, an SSD teacher for the Hazelwood School District, said that in addition to learning about contributing to the community, the students are focusing on job skills, employability skills, and being able to find out what it takes to be a good employee.

Sierra Wynne, a junior in the CBVI program and at Hazelwood West High School, said that being a part of Project Warmup has meant a lot to her. "You feel like you've made their day when it's cold outside and there may be rain or snow and the person gets to stay warm," she said.

Kymm Lewis, an SSD paraprofessional at Hazelwood Central High School, is also proud of Project Warmup. "We had one of the homeless shelters come pick up an order of 200 blankets the other day. The label says, 'Made with love' and has the SSD logo," she said.

According to Wolf, it's important to give where you live. "That's been a late-in-life phenomenon for me because my son has been chronically ill his whole life," he said. "I have a special place in my heart to help kids because we've gotten a lot of extra help through SSD and The School District of Clayton."

"I've learned throughout my life that it's not about how much money you have. It's what do you do with your money," said Wolf. "It's been in the later stages of my life that I can afford to be a little more philanthropic." ■

Special Education Foundation

Save the Date

The Special Education Foundation's 11th annual fashion show and luncheon, hosted by its Women Leaders group, will be held at noon on Thursday, May 7, at Saks Fifth Avenue at Plaza Frontenac. Visit www.sef-stl.org/events for details.

The Women Leaders use the proceeds from the event to fund special projects requested by the principals of SSD's five special education schools. During the 2019-2020 school year, supported projects included:

- Annual holiday family luncheon for Ackerman School
- Spirit wear for Litzsinger School
- Ice cream truck for field day for Neuwoehner School
- Prom pictures for Northview School
- Outdoor balance beam and push-up bar for track for Southview School

In addition to these items, the Women Leaders group supports the SEF's critical needs program, which seeks to remove financial challenges to students attending and thriving in school. In addition to supporting the program with proceeds from the fashion show, the group recently conducted a drive to gather winter coats and other supplies including diapers, socks and underwear. For information about the critical needs program or to apply for assistance, visit www.sef-stl.org/programs/critical-needs. Applications may be submitted at any time.



Camp Assistance

The SEF awards camperships to help maintain educational momentum and progress for students with disabilities over the summer. Campership applications are due on April 3 and are available at www.sef-stl.org/applications.



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As we work to continuously improve the District's communication with stakeholders, we look forward to starting a conversation with you. ■