

Zephyr Buddies program grows friendship through pandemic

This school year, a staff and community member group formed to build peer-to-peer student relationships and community relationships at Mahtomedi Public Schools.

One of the projects that the group has worked on is called Zephyr Buddies. The Buddies program is a mentoring program between secondary students (grades 6-12) and elementary students (grades K-5). Knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges for students, the Zephyr Buddies program aims to help students make new friendships and connections during an unprecedented time.

The staff and community members, called the Zephyr Community Connections Group, started organizing the Buddies program in January. All secondary and elementary students were invited to participate in the program. The elementary students were paired with secondary students based on their interests, which ranged from Lego challenges to arts and crafts.

The Buddies held their first virtual meeting in February and met every other week via Google Meet. Even though the interactions were virtual, strong friendships grew. The mentors were surveyed about their experience. Some of the sentiments the secondary students shared follow:

- "I think this is so valuable. I love being a mentor/role model. I want to be someone my buddy can trust and just be another person she can talk to about anything. I am having so much fun, and I hope she is too. This is such an awesome program, and I really look forward to the meetings."
- "I believe that I am getting an opportunity to be a role model and help guide and support a younger child. I want to help my Mentee and it can be with anything, sports, school, friends, etc. I feel that I am making an impact on my Mentee's life and I will cherish that. And not only am I impacting her life, but she is also impacting mine. I get to feel what it's like to be in Kindergarten again, and every time I talk to her, she always puts a smile on my face."
- "I get to understand the life of a little kid again and how happy they are. They remind me of an easier time."



Mentor Claire Wendland (grade 11, Mahtomedi High School) plays on the playground with her mentee, Weston Seuffert (grade 2, Wildwood Elementary School).

Mentors weren't the only ones to feel the impact of the program; parents of the mentees have also shared feedback about the impact they've seen with their child, noting their children are always excited for "Buddy Day" and that they are building fun, meaningful relationships together.

The program has now shifted to in-person meetings. The group held its first in-person meeting on May 4. When students arrived, it took a few minutes for them to recognize and match up with their buddy. The students spent an hour enjoying their favorite sport, playing on the playground, and decorating a flower pot to give to their buddy.

Kate Andersen, Mahtomedi Community Education director and co-organizer of the program, noted the program's success, "It's fitting that the Buddies gave each other plants at our first in-person meeting; the growth of friendship and the development of leadership has been really wonderful to witness. The reciprocal learning that is taking place is powerful. I think the mentors are learning just as much as the mentees."

Submitted



Mentor Ishana Didwania (grade 9, Mahtomedi High School) and Mentee Crosby Kaltved (grade 1, Wildwood Elementary School) show the flower pots they made for each other.



Mentor Ava Hanson (grade 6, Mahtomedi Middle School) plays a game of soccer with her mentee, Andrew Vaughn (grade 3, O.H. Anderson Elementary School).

ALL PHOTOS SUBMITTED

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