

Redmond Reporter/Sammamish Reporter

Making a Difference

By Mary Stevens Decker
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What could you accomplish by giving up just one hour of your free time each week? Don't underestimate yourself. You could make a profound difference in the life of a child by volunteering as a lunch buddy, mentor or tutor through LINKS (Looking Into the Needs of Kids and Schools).

Supported by the Lake Washington School District (LWSD), the Lake Washington Schools Foundation (LWSF) and the Lake Washington PTA Council, LINKS recruits caring members of the community — whether or not they have children in local schools — to work with kids individually or in groups, as needs are identified by teachers.

The program was started five years ago by LWSD parents Nanci Wehr and Claire Beighle, “but things didn't evolve as quickly as we'd hoped, because of lack of funding,” Wehr explained.

Beighle added, “It was run by a committee and really needs a paid employee for a district of this size.” The LWSD serves around 20,000 students in Redmond, Kirkland, Sammamish and a small portion of Woodinville.

Beighle and Wehr shared their ideas with Tracy Hoein, executive director of the LWSF.

“They studied the VIBES (Volunteers in Bellevue's Educational System) program in the Bellevue schools and the Issaquah VOICE (Volunteers of Issaquah Changing Education) models, which have proven to be effective,” Hoein stated. “This is a holistic approach to student learning.”

AXA Foundation and Cate Victorino, an Edward Jones Investments advisor in Sammamish, donated money to the LWSF for the purpose of hiring a LINKS volunteer coordinator, which is Wehr. She and volunteers, including Beighle, are recruiting LINKS participants, especially reaching out to corporations which encourage community service.

Frequently-asked questions include, “Do I have to be an expert in a particular subject?” and “If I volunteer, does that mean I can't go on vacation?”

The time commitment is very flexible. If you can spare one hour a week, that's fine — and if you're going out-of-town for a while, you just need to notify the coordinator ahead of time.

And although some LINKS volunteers assist kids with homework, others are needed strictly for emotional or organizational support.

Students with such needs can be found in every corner of the district and every economic group. Some are English Language Learners, others are dealing with a divorce or death in the family, “and there are a lot of kids who fall right in the middle — they're not the talk of the class — maybe they just don't fit in,”

said Beighle. "We've sent out evaluations to teachers and counselors who've really reinforced for us the value of this."

Desiree Woodruff, ELL teacher at A.G. Bell Elementary commented, "Because of the high number of ELL students that I serve every year, I am unable to reach out and assist needs that some of them have." Through efforts from LINKS volunteers, these children have "increased their confidence level, improved their English communication skills, received direct support and assistance from an English-speaking adult, which they often lack at home and become more successful in the classroom," she said.

Ann Glassey, secretary and volunteer coordinator at Horace Mann Elementary said, "LINKS has connected us with volunteers that were interested in being a lunch buddy and we have then, in turn, connected those adults to a student here at Mann. The bond that is made between the student and the lunch buddy is remarkable. ... Lifelong friendships are formed and watching a student learn how to nurture and develop that relationship is the success. I hope we have the opportunity to work with LINKS for a long time."

Would you like to give LINKS a hand?

Hour-long orientation sessions will take place at the LWSD Resource Center on Thursday, Oct. 2 at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. but inquiries can be directed to Wehr, at links@lwsd.org or (425) 702-3410 at any time. For more information, visit www.linksvolunteer.org.

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