

Linking kids and knowledge: Mentoring program seeks volunteers

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A one-on-one mentoring program for students with language barriers or other academic obstacles is going into its fifth year in the Lake Washington School District (LWSD) with full funding and increased presence in every corner of the district.

LINKS (Looking Into the Needs of Kids and Schools) funding for the 2009-10 school year is made possible with grant money from the Lake Washington Schools Foundation (LWSF) and grantors including the City of Redmond, AT & T and the Discuren Foundation.

LINKS program coordinator Nanci Wehr has use of office space at the LWSD Resource Center, 16250 NE 74th St. at Redmond Town Center and is recruiting volunteers to attend two upcoming orientation sessions there.

The first is at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 15 and another is at 10 a.m. Thursday, Sept. 17. All prospective volunteers must complete the LWSD volunteer application (available online at www.lwsd.org) and Washington State Patrol background check.

In 2008-09, LINKS placed volunteers in 13 schools from Alcott Elementary on the far east side of the district to Juanita High School on the far west.

At Redmond Junior High, Redmond High School and Juanita High, Spanish-speaking volunteers were especially needed to assist ELL (English Language Learner) students with math, science and reading skills, either in classrooms or at after-school meetings.

Many other languages are spoken in the district, as well, and volunteers fluent in a variety of languages are sought.

At the elementary level, a popular LINKS program is Lunch Buddies. Caring adults spend one hour a week eating lunch with a child who may just be learning English, is very shy or otherwise in need of a little extra attention. They can use some of the lunch period to read to the child, play a game or help the child with homework.

"It's beneficial academically and for self-esteem," said Wehr.

And volunteers say they get a mood boost from making a difference in the life of a child.

Retirees often participate, as do employees from local companies such as Microsoft and Kirkland's Pilchuck Contractors, Wehr added.

Some LINKS volunteers who were Lunch Buddies for elementary kids have stayed in touch with them as they moved up to junior high.

"Survey results showed that 100 percent of the teachers agreed all students in the LINKS program thrived academically and some emotionally, when receiving one-on-one assistance from LINKS volunteers," said Wehr.

Comments included the following:

"A beautiful friendship has developed," said a teacher from Juanita Elementary.

"The student now reached out to others, including adults in the classroom," noted a Redmond Elementary teacher.

A teacher from Rosa Parks Elementary commented, "I have seen a great increase in confidence and more positive attitude toward reading and writing," while a teacher at Rockwell Elementary said a LINKS volunteer "has done an outstanding job supporting our safety net students."

To learn more about LINKS, visit www.lwsd.org and click on the "For The Community" tab or contact Nanci Wehr at LINKS@lwsd.org or (425) 702-3410.

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Nanci Wehr, coordinator of the LINKS (Looking Into the Needs of Kids and Schools) program, is recruiting volunteers to serve as one-on-one mentors for children and teens in the Lake Washington School District.
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