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Partnerships make school community thrive

By Debra Bowers, Ph. D., Superintendent, St. Louis Park Public Schools

Last week as I was watching election returns on television, I heard newscasters talk about the difficulty cities across our nation faced in finding election judges. Our community faced that same challenge, but we turned it into an opportunity for youth involvement because of our strong city-school partnership. Fifty high school students, recruited by our city-school volunteer office, answered the call to fill these critical jobs.

The depth and breadth of partnerships supporting students and lifelong learners of all ages make St. Louis Park unique. Situated on the edge of Minneapolis, St. Louis Park has an urban feel, with the advantages of small-town living. Our community inspires creative thinkers. Arts opportunities are beginning to explode, nurtured by Friends of the Arts, an organization that has recently been given new life because of funding from the City and partnership with the school district to provide a home at Lenox Community Center.

From our pioneering Children First initiative to our successful Central Clinic, now in its tenth year of providing free health care through the support of the City, Park Nicollet Foundation and St. Louis Park Public Schools, partnerships abound in St. Louis Park. Partnership is about how organizations, businesses and individuals can share their skills, experience and talent and gain personal satisfaction and growth. It's also about how youth can give back to their community.

Throughout the district, partnerships are forged with individuals, businesses and organizations, from small to large.

For example:

- A single volunteer from the Rotary Club helps a student at Aquila learn to read.
- Two professional musicians inspire children who live at the Meadowbrook apartment complex with drumming classes (funded by a city-school partnership).
- Cedar Manor students will engage in multicultural music and dance with an artist in residence from Ghana, Africa, thanks to a partnership with Target.

Long-term partnerships make a lasting impact on student achievement. Small business owner Lyle Sorenson, of Nielsen Framing Studio Inc. shares his passion for art with students from Susan Lindgren Intermediate Center. For the past ten years, Lyle has framed three pieces of student art from Susan Lindgren Intermediate Center each month, then displayed them in his gallery. At the end of the year, Susan Lindgren hosts an art show of all the pieces. The sense of pride and accomplishment this partnership instills in students is incredible.

Opportunity for meaningful youth involvement is a key component of our successful learning community. More than 100 young people, (National Honor Society students and others), worked alongside volunteers from Citizens Bank at the Westwood Hills Nature

Center and Recreation Center Halloween parties in a shared commitment to provide fun and safe family activities.

The resources partners bring are impossible to duplicate even if funding were not an issue, because it's the community we build through the process of partnering that makes St. Louis Park thrive. The value of volunteer services in our district last year alone was over a quarter of a million dollars.

From small businesses to large corporations, individuals to organizations, there are literally more partnerships than we can count. But there can never be too many. If you are currently engaged in building community assets: Thank you, your contributions mean so much. You are helping St. Louis Park earn the distinction of being one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People as recognized by the national Alliance for Youth organization.

If this article is making you think of ways you can support student learning, call us today at 952-928-6061. Children First: It starts with you!

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