

Common Good RSVP Volunteers

Invest in Education

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by: Jennifer Halberg, Director of Senior Services, Common Good RSVP, Catholic Charities.

Mark Ristau, Principal of Medford Elementary School, is committed to providing his students with every opportunity possible to succeed academically. Partnering with Catholic Charities' Common Good Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) to increase the number of adult volunteers in the school's classrooms helps him to do just that.



Mark Ristau is Principal of Medford Elementary School.

Since partnering with Common Good RSVP in September of 2014, the program has placed twelve RSVP volunteers who regularly serve at the school. The RSVP volunteers assist first through fourth grade students with math, reading, spelling, science and social studies. In addition to the increased academic success of the students, Ristau comments, "the partnership (with Common Good RSVP) has given Medford Elementary the opportunity to have our local seniors in the building assisting our staff and working with our youth in a structured way. RSVP has enabled our school to create this partnership which benefits our youth and our seniors. It has been fun to watch the relationships develop between the students and our seniors."

While the benefit to the students is the primary reason RSVP volunteers serve in classrooms, RSVP volunteers also receive benefits in return. Connie Mabray, an RSVP volunteer who moved back to Winona, MN after a 40 year absence, was looking to connect with the community through volunteering, especially working with children. After enrolling in Common Good RSVP, she was placed at Riverway Learning Community where she reads with students. When asked about her RSVP experience, Mabray commented, "I like how eager the kids are to learn. They are positive and honest." Mabray is happy with the opportunity to be involved in the lives of others as well as the chance to feel at home again while investing in her community.

RSVP volunteer Sam Gullickson participates in an RSVP pen pal program with fifth grade students in Waseca, MN. A former elementary educator and counselor, Gullickson said, "I value time spent with my pen pal. I like to write and I appreciate the letter I receive each month." The connection across generations develops as the pen pals follow the teacher provided curriculum, which defines the topics of each letter while improving grammar and English core competencies through writing.

In Rochester, MN, RSVP volunteers are placed throughout the district in partnership with Rochester Public Schools Volunteer in Education Program. Blythe Polito, Literacy Coordinator for Rochester Public Schools, says, "Positive experiences with reading is key for students to learn to love reading and view themselves as readers, and positive literacy experiences with volunteers supports students in developing a positive attitude."

RSVP volunteer Mike Sheehan's student observations during his volunteer experience reinforces Polito's assertion. Sheehan states, "I volunteer at the schools because it is my opportunity to give back, support schools, and help student development, which is the most important thing. It is amazing to see the growth in a child's ability. It happens in a really short period of time, in all cases, whether the student is struggling or excelling. Just in a few hours over a short period time there is tremendous growth!"

Common Good RSVP works in partnership with twenty two elementary schools, supporting 198 RSVP volunteers who contribute to the academic success of students. New volunteers are currently being enrolled. If you are interested in volunteering, or are aware of an elementary school that can benefit from a similar partnership, please contact Jennifer Halberg at (507) 454-2270 or jhalberg@ccwinona.org.

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