



## EDUCATING HEARTS AND MINDS

*Understanding how others feel.  
Giving back to the community.  
Treating each other with respect.*

Those are just some of the lessons being taught as part of the curriculum in District 29 and through a multitude of clubs and groups. While the official name of this approach is Social Emotional Learning (SEL), for Middlefork and Sunset Ridge students, it is just the way things are done at school.

SEL has long been a priority for the district. Between the two schools, there are more than 15 programs and volunteer opportunities available to students that help build SEL skills. Students show empathy, make connections with each other and manage complex emotions because of programs like The Nora Project, which encourages empathy among students and their peers with disabilities, as well as Random Acts of Kindness Week.

“We are dedicated to helping our students navigate through the ever-changing world by building empathy, compassion, relationship skills, and responsible decision making,” says Sunset Ridge Principal Dr. Ivy Sukenik. “Through several different avenues, we are helping students learn and grow in these critical skills.”



*As part of a student council event at Sunset Ridge School, students loaded a truck with gifts that were delivered to the Northwestern Settlement House.*

Middlefork Principal Dr. Mary Frances Greene says that a major goal for the school is to develop healthy, compassionate, service-minded citizens. “We believe these programs are helping students get along with each other, have empathy for one another and understand their place in the world beyond just themselves,” she says.

Teachers and staff members share that many students are deeply impacted by this focus on social and emotional learning.

When talking about The Nora Project, Student Services Teacher Nina Furman says, “... the program truly creates friendships and bonds that have inspired each and every one of us.”

Learning Center Director Lauren Gray shares that during Random Acts of Kindness Week, “...students were energized and inspired, and the attitudes around school were remarkable.”

# THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING ARE UNDISPUTED



Long before the Illinois State Board of Education mandated the inclusion of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into the curriculum in 2003, District 29 recognized the important role of these skills in a well-rounded educational experience and dedicated resources to SEL instruction in our schools.

SEL refers to a broad range of competencies that include identifying and managing emotions, perspective taking, social skills, communication skills, problem solving skills, and contributing to the well-being of the school and community. But some might ask if SEL instruction really results in meaningful benefits?



*Students and staff sent each other notes as part of Random Acts of Kindness Week that were posted at the school for all to see.*

Research has documented unequivocally that SEL instruction leads to improved social and mental health functioning, higher levels of student engagement, and improved academ-



*Students participate in Play Pods at Middlefork School, fostering connections between students across grade levels. This display shows photos of each play pod and the name of each student on a dolphin below the picture.*

ic achievement. For example, a 2013 meta-analysis of over 200 studies concluded that students who participated in SEL programs showed an 11 percentile-point gain in academic achievement compared to students who did not participate in SEL programs. The study concluded that SEL program participants also showed improved classroom and social behavior, an increased ability to manage stress, higher levels of empathy, and stronger teamwork skills. Moreover, a national study by Columbia University showed an average benefit-cost ratio of 11 to 1 among the six evidence-based SEL programs studied. This means that, on average, for every \$1 invested in SEL programming, there is an \$11 return. The answer to the question about the benefits of SEL instruction is an unequivocal “YES.” An ounce of SEL prevention is definitely worth a pound of cure!

SEL instruction is so deeply rooted in District 29 culture, that it is embedded in our mission statement, “Educating the hearts and minds of students...” It can be seen in direct instruction lessons in the classroom,

school-based activities, and service learning opportunities.

In the classroom, specially trained staff teach effective communication, social problem-solving, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. School-wide programs, such as the Middle Fork Playpods/SRS Communities, partner students across grade levels to learn and practice SEL skills. Through targeted activities such as the Middlefork Playground PALS, Dedicated Dolphins, and Student Council, we create opportunities for our students to practice SEL skills while making a meaningful difference in their schools and community. Service learning opportunities such as making breakfast/lunches for homeless individuals, adopting families from Northwestern Settlement House for the holidays, volunteering at the Senior Center, and contributing to community organizations at Family Service Night also provide opportunities for students to actively engage in SEL.

During this time when it seems that more Americans feel disconnected and divided than ever before, we recognize that SEL can be a deeply impactful component of a 21st century education. In this edition of the District 29 Board of Education newsletter, we highlight just a few of the opportunities for our children to learn and practice SEL skills.

**Dr. Edward Stange**  
Superintendent, District 29

# STUDENTS SUPPORT EACH OTHER AND THE COMMUNITY

The evidence of a strong Social Emotional Learning focus at Middlefork and Sunset Ridge schools can be found on the playgrounds, in classes, during assemblies, and after school. Here are just a few examples of its powerful impact on students.



*Students participate in fun activities as a part of The Nora Project.*

## THE NORA PROJECT

The Nora Project's mission is to teach empathy by sparking friendships between students and their peers with disabilities. Student Services Teacher Nina Furman shares how far-reaching its impact is on Sunset Ridge students.

"This has given students the opportunity to look beyond their friends' disabilities and connect with them based on commonalities," she shares. "Students light up when they see their Nora friends and the bonds formed have been amazing."

## PLAYPODS AND PLAYGROUND PALS

In order to foster strong relationships between students in different grade levels at Middlefork, the school implemented the Playpods program several years ago. Playpods pairs up students across grade levels for unstructured play. About three times each month, consistent small groups

of kindergarteners through 3rd graders get together to participate in some kind of play activity.

"This allows students to make new friends, learn new games, and basically have fun," Middlefork Principal Dr. Mary Frances Greene says. "By creating these cross-grade level opportunities, students are able to build connections with other students they might never encounter and support each other."

From that initiative, Playground Pals was born, where 3rd grade students are trained to supervise and then oversee an activity station during recess. "This program provides the third graders with a leadership opportunity," Greene says. "It has been so successful that we have third graders who regularly give up their own recess time to lead Playground Pals for the kindergartners."



*Students take part in the Playground Pals program.*

## LEUKEMIA AND LYMPHOMA SOCIETY PENNY WAR FUNDRAISER

This event was hosted by the Sunset Ridge Student Council, meaning students were at the center of planning and organizing every aspect of the event. This included advertising, collecting money, and leading the full-school informational assemblies. The school raised nearly \$1,500 this year for

the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

"This is one example of the importance of student council in allowing students to grow their leadership skills and to help them see all the pieces that need to happen behind the scenes to make even a small project come together," 6th Grade Science Teacher and Student Council Advisor Christine Keopraseuth says.

## DEDICATED DOLPHINS

Dedicated Dolphins is a group of approximately 30 students in second and third grade at Middlefork who voluntarily give up a recess every other week to participate in leadership and service opportunities that benefit the school and the local community. There are several projects the students organize, including:

- Visits to the North Shore Senior Center to participate in activities with the members.
- Making cards to send to children in area hospitals.
- Cleaning up trash and waste outside of the school on a regular basis through the Environmental Care Crew.

"When we went to the local senior center for the field trip, the adults who worked there, as well as the senior citizens, were so impressed with how articulate and engaging the students were," says First Grade Teacher Hillary Davis, who is one of four adult leaders of the group.

"The students are learning leadership skills, as well as the importance of helping others in the school and the community," says Director of Library Information Services Kellie Johnson, one of the leaders of the Dedicated Dolphins.



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*Cultivating a learning community that engages the hearts and minds of students, one child at a time*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

see more at [www.sunsetridge29.org](http://www.sunsetridge29.org)

MAY <b>7</b>	<b>Education Committee Meeting</b> Sunset Ridge School	6:00 p.m.
MAY <b>7</b>	<b>Board of Education Meeting</b> Sunset Ridge School	7:00 p.m.
MAY <b>17</b>	<b>Spring Band and Orchestra Concert</b> Sunset Ridge School	7:00 p.m.
MAY <b>22</b>	<b>Spring Jazz/Choral Concert</b> Sunset Ridge School	7:00 p.m.
MAY <b>24</b>	<b>Spring Sing</b> Middlefork School	7:00 p.m.
MAY <b>31</b>	<b>4th and 5th Grade Band and Orchestra Concert</b> Sunset Ridge School	7:00 p.m.
JUNE <b>5</b>	<b>Board of Education Meeting</b> Sunset Ridge School	7:00 p.m.
JUNE <b>12</b>	<b>8th Grade Graduation</b> Sunset Ridge School	7:00 p.m.

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Amanda Alpert Knight  
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