

Woodstock Community Unit School District 200

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Elementary ‘Difference Makers’ are taking off

A new partnership between Woodstock Community Unit School District 200 and the City of Woodstock is planting seeds they hope will bloom into confident learners and young people who value the importance of serving their communities.

The Difference Makers program began in mid-October with about 120 fourth- and fifth-grade students, which includes about 20 students at each of District 200’s six elementary schools. Students meet weekly at their home schools.

Visits to area assisted living facilities, conservation projects, and other ideas to introduce elementary school age students to community service are all being discussed.

Keely Krueger, assistant superintendent for early childhood and elementary education, said the District developed Difference Makers through a CURE (Coronavirus Urgent Remediation Emergency) grant earmarked for afterschool programs. Krueger sought out city officials as partners and applied for the grant over the summer.

“It’s a great example of age-friendly intergenerational program development. Planned projects highlight the value of older adult mentoring and interaction, creating service learning opportunities for students and increasing understanding and appreciation of others throughout our community,” said Terry Willcockson, Grants Manager, City of Woodstock.

On Oct. 25, Prairiewood Elementary School students in Stephanie Bakakos’s Difference Makers class worked on honing their math skills, digital literacy lessons and a hands-on activity building a slingshot device to propel rubber ducks.

Students learned to carefully follow directions and how to use a protractor to determine the best angles to launch the ducks toward a target.

Amy Mock, a District 200 instructional coach who oversees the Difference Makers program, said school staff selected a diverse group of students. The afterschool program is entirely voluntary, but Mock said very few parents opted out when their children were selected.

“Parents are excited about it, and the kids are excited,” she said.

Mock said students follow a designed STEM curriculum and will begin taking service field trips in 2023. The first plan involved building microphones, which students will use to interview senior citizens to record their personal stories. Other plans are still being determined, and students will be surveyed on their preferences.

“We do have ideas for the servant leadership component, but we want students to take ownership of that,” she said.

Mock said the goal of Difference Makers is to build confident learners who are more digitally savvy while instilling a sense of service in students that they can carry on into middle and high school.