

Engaging Father Figures

Hortonville program enlists the help and support of positive male role models

SESSION *Engaging Fathers/Father Figures In Our Schools* | **Presenters** Hortonville Area School District: Travis Lawrence, principal; Jeff Diehl, volunteer; Ed Jarosz, volunteer; Sally Bowers, associate principal

It is estimated that 20 million children in the U.S. are fatherless. Children with absent fathers are four times more likely to live in poverty, more likely to use drugs, and are less likely to graduate from high school.

Travis Lawrence, principal of Greenville Middle School in the Hortonville Area School District, saw the effects that fatherlessness can have on students and wanted to do something about it. The school adopted the WATCH D.O.G.S. framework to help get fathers in the school. WATCH D.O.G.S (Dads of Great Students) is a national program designed to help schools get positive male role models into schools and positively impact students.

“Why do we need fathers in schools?” Lawrence asked. “We have two goals — providing positive male role models and helping us provide safety and security. They give us an extra set of ears and eyes in our school hallways.”

To be clear, Lawrence said he and the program acknowledge the importance of female role models and the program doesn’t diminish their role and presence in schools. Instead, the program is about reaching out to positive male role

models who may not otherwise step forward and volunteer.

Greenville Middle School kicked the program off with a pizza night where the school invited students and their dads into the school. From that event, several dozen dads signed up. Today, the middle school has about 50 dads who volunteer.

Volunteers have to undergo a background check and must wear a WATCH D.O.G.S. t-shirt when in school. Scheduling is flexible. Some volunteers may only be in the school a couple hours, others volunteer for an entire school day.

The volunteers’ schedule is set by the school. In a typical school day, volunteers help greet students at the door. When the school day starts, they go to their child’s classroom and check-in. Then they go to a classroom to help out. Volunteers help with lunch and recess. They also help students one-on-one when they can.

“One of the coolest things is when you’re helping a student with math or whatever and all of a sudden they say, ‘Now I get it’ and you know that you’ve made a positive impact on a kid,” said Ed Jarosz, one of the Hortonville volunteers.

Another benefit of the program is



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that by inviting community members into the school, you create advocates for the district.

“They’re out in the community spreading the good word about our district,” Lawrence said. “What can be better than that?”

Volunteers, like Jeff Diehl, said that he has had nothing but a positive experience volunteering in his son’s school.

“I can tell you from personal experience, we get a lot more out of it than we put into it,” he said. ■