



# Building Bridges

Janesville school leaders focused on opening new world and opportunities to students

*Shelby Anderson*

A district-wide effort in the Janesville School District is connecting students in Janesville to students across the globe. Since January, students in the district have been participating in a world-wide project with the goal of building bridges between schools all over the world and in their own community.

The district is running the Bridges Conference, which challenges students and educators to build bridges — figuratively and literally — between people and knowledge. This is not your typical conference. It takes place over the course of about seven months — beginning in January and ending with a festival in July. The conference

builds a global education community and includes participating schools from the U.S., China, Finland, Singapore and other countries.

The Janesville School District website explains the basis of the project: “Its origin derives from within our inter-connectedness as people ... we feel it’s essential to collaborate as an education collective to do studies about bridges and thus promote mutual understanding and communication between and among people (such as family members, educators, students, neighbors, and other education stakeholders) in this way we can provide improvement of educational policies, strategies, and practices.”

Karen Schulte, superintendent of the Janesville School District, said participating in the conference is about providing students another opportunity to engage in international education.

“We want students here in Janesville to have a world-class education,” she said.

The conference aims to promote further communication and mutual appreciation among schools around the world as well as in the wider community. This means that projects within the Bridges Conference can work to connect students to students globally or it can be connecting students to community members.

How are we going to make these learning experiences last longer?

## How can we go beyond that ‘normal’ school project?

— Craig Bergum, teacher, Edison

Craig Bergum, a teacher at Janesville’s Edison Middle School, says he has been impressed with the projects that have come out of the Bridges Conference. One project built bridges between Janesville middle school students and veterans. Students at Edison Middle School wrote letters to veterans thanking them for their service. This is where most school projects would end but projects in the Bridges Conference challenge teachers to take the learning a step farther.

A veteran was invited to the classroom and talked to the students about what he had experienced. Bergum said it was a very powerful moment for the students and the veteran. After hearing the veteran’s first-hand account, students were challenged to write another letter to their veteran. Bergum said the first letters students wrote had been only a couple paragraphs but after hearing the veteran speak, the letters became two pages.

Teacher Krista Twist said the activity not only connected her students to veterans but also allowed her to teach through a different lens.

“It fits right in with the lessons I was teaching,” Twist said. “I was able to connect this very easily to how to write a letter, the structure of how to write that letter, and the components within the letter.”

One student was compelled to write a letter to a grandparent who was a veteran. Bergum said the student didn’t know the grandparent all that well and received a long, thoughtful response.

“It gave her a way to talk to her grandfather,” Bergum said. “These

are the kinds of things that can come out of building these bridges.”

Students at Kennedy Elementary School connected visual and performing arts with science and social studies concepts. A visiting artist helped students communicate and explore these subject areas through art and a residency with a dance professor from the University of Wisconsin exposed students to interpretative dance. The project culminated in a performance by all of the elementary students as they performed their curriculum in a dance.

“We embraced the idea that I think Bridges represents, which is pulling together the creativity and the innovation of our students,” said Leah Hellendbrand, a teacher at Kennedy Elementary School.

Another project is connecting high school students to engineers — a robotics team is being mentored by engineers from the community. A project at a middle school connects students to senior citizens.

Many of these projects were already taking place in the district’s schools but Bergum said the Bridges Conference challenged students and educators to take these projects a step further.

“We’re looking at how are we going to make these learning experiences last longer? How can we go beyond that ‘normal’ school project?”

Multiple subject areas are engaged in these projects and, most importantly, they will be shared with students around the world via a website and also during a special festival.

“Artifacts from these projects will be put together — whether they’re

## BRIDGES PROJECTS in Janesville

**Here is a quick look** at some of the projects taking place in Janesville as part of the Bridges Global Education Community Conference.

**WATER DANCE** | Kennedy Elementary School hosted an artist-in-residence/dance educator. Karen McShane-Hellenbrand, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Dance Department, integrated academic and dance standards throughout an extensive dance residency. Water served as a thematic ‘umbrella’ for the residency, bridging arts, academics, and environmental advocacy. The residency culminated in an all-school performance, which demonstrated students’ curricular understanding through the art form of dance.

**TALENT SHOW** | Students from Harrison, Roosevelt, and Madison Elementary Schools put on a talent show at the Janesville Performing Arts Center that focused on how language can build bridges between cultures.

**K-5 BRIDGES ART PROJECT** | Students at Harrison Elementary School took part in a multi-grade project. Students in kindergarten through second-grade painted a large mural depicting a bridge and students in third through fifth grades wrote about obstacles that they have encountered and overcome. This project will be on display at the Janesville Performing Arts Center during the Bridges Art Festival in July.

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT** | Fifth-grade students at Harrison Elementary School collected and archived the oral history of the families in an attempt to bridge generational differences and examine social expectations. The project is part of a larger effort to collect an oral history of Harrison Elementary School.

**LETTER WRITING** | Students at Edison Middle School wrote letters to veterans thanking them for their service. A veteran was also welcomed into the school and he talked to the students about his experiences.

**ROBOTICS TEAM** | The robotics team at Janesville Parker High School reached out to engineers in the community to provide them with mentors and to see how their skills can be used in real-world careers. □

## Building Bridges

films, pictures, stories, construction of bridge models — these will all be portrayed in a culminating activity this summer,” Schulte said.

That activity is the Bridges Conference festival in July. At the festival, the student projects will be shared with other students and educators from around the world through the universal language of the arts. The festival coincides with the district’s Summer International Education Institute, which will provide international learning opportunities to students in the district. Students and their families will also have the opportunity to host an international student for three weeks during the Summer International Education Institute.

Global learning won’t end in Janesville when the Bridges Conference is completed this summer. The Bridges is part of a larger effort being undertaken at the district to

connect Janesville students to people and knowledge all over the world. Schulte said she challenges her educators and administrators to think of new ways to engage students in real-world, relevant learning.

“I tell staff to be risk takers,” Schulte said. “It’s ok if they fail, I just ask that they learn from it.”

One example of this kind of teaching is an experience recently had by students at Janesville Craig High School. Through the work of their teacher, journalism students at the high school teleconferenced with a journalist in Ukraine during the massive protests that rocked the country. Schulte said the students were powerfully affected by talking with the Ukrainian journalist.

“That is something that these kids will never forget,” Schulte said.

Kevin Leavy, public information specialist for the district, said an important aspect of the Bridges

Conference and the other international learning opportunities in the district is that they are available to all students.

“We’re bringing all of this to our students in their classrooms,” Leavy said. “We’re trying to make it that much easier for international learning because it’s in their building.”

In another instance, a middle school teacher connected with an anthropologist in Switzerland. The anthropologist spoke to 100 sixth-grade students via teleconferencing about his work, which included examining mummies. Schulte said the students were completely engaged, “You could have heard a pin drop.”

“We have this ability in this day and age to connect anywhere,” Schulte said. “We are going to be sure that our students in Janesville aren’t left out.”

*Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.*

## REPRESENTING SCHOOL DISTRICTS THROUGHOUT WISCONSIN

Rena Waterman Aldana	Lindsey A. Kraig
Joel S. Aziere	Alana M. Leffler
Andrew J. Bezouska	Susan M. Love
Clifford B. Buelow	Mark L. Olson
Robert H. Buikema	Nancy L. Pirkey
Sarrie L. Devore	Gary M. Ruesch
Matthew J. Flanary	Brett D. Schnepfer
Suzanne M. Glich	Daniel G. Vliet
Mary L. Hubacher	

EXCEPTIONAL  
SCHOOL LAW  
EXPERTISE

With a talented team of attorneys who have decades of combined experience, we offer unrivaled legal services whether you need guidance on general school law matters, help navigating recent changes to collective bargaining laws, assistance with special education issues, solutions to employment problems, aid with employee benefits programs, defense in litigation or any of the legal issues you face.

20855 Watertown Road • Suite 200 • Waukesha, WI 53186  
T: 262-364-0300 • F: 262-364-0320 • [www.buelowvetter.com](http://www.buelowvetter.com)

Learn more at [www.buelowvetter.com](http://www.buelowvetter.com)



**Buelow Vetter**  
Buikema Olson & Vliet, LLC