



School Community Building Begins in the Third Grade

Washington-Monroe Elementary is a K-5 building in a small city in central Illinois. Situated in one of the city's economically challenged neighborhoods, more than half of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school's performance seems unaffected by its socioeconomic demographics and is distinguished by the state as a Spotlight School which recognizes high performing, high poverty schools having at least 60% of the students meeting or exceeding state reading and mathematics standards. Washington-Monroe posted a 90.4% in its most recent round of state assessments.

The environment is rich in common experiences shared between students, families, and educators. For students, one exercise in common experience begins as early as the third grade when students take on responsibilities as mentors to younger students. In a program called Book Buddies third graders are paired with kindergarten students, fourth graders with second graders, and fifth graders with first graders to share literacy skills each week, building relationships, shared experiences, and social capital.

Another program at the school brings fifth graders, as a privilege, together with the special needs students. In this program each special needs student is assigned three "fifth grade friends" who meet with them weekly to play educational computer games and do other activities. A parent of one special needs student at Washington-Monroe says that in addition to the "fifth grade friends" to the special needs class, "The teachers of the regular education classes encourage students to interact with all the special needs students, even outside of the school and they do...even into the following years when they go on to middle school. It is so great, and we are so thankful!"

School Community Network Resource Spotlight



Building Block: Connection

Resource: Community Building

School community building takes place around common experiences shared among students, families, teachers, and staff. All community members need not participate simultaneously.

Here's one example: An Illinois school has an All-School Debate. Students in the fourth and fifth grade are selected to debate parents on topics such as bedtime rules, household chores, and family responsibilities. The students spend classroom time learning debate formalities, and college students from the local university's debate team assist in the debate preparation of students. This and other ideas can be found in the SCN Resources to help bring families and schools together in ways that connect to learning.

The **School Community Network's Family Engagement Tool (FET)** is an online family engagement program developed by the Academic Development Institute and is part of the suite of services offered through the School Community Network. The Building Blocks referenced are the framework components common to School Community Network programs and the resources described are available to subscribers of any of the School Community Network programs. For more information visit our website, www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org.