

Dads doing their part

New volunteer program has big impact at local school

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File photo by Deb Jacques

Dan Simons, the grandfather of a student at Huron Elementary School in Clinton Township, monitors kids in the lunchroom on Feb. 6. Simons is one of more than 100 volunteers who signed up for the school's new Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students) program, in which father figures work there for a full school day.

CLINTON TOWNSHIP — At Huron Elementary School, the dads have become D.O.G.S.

Beth Gleason, the social worker at Huron — part of Chippewa Valley Schools — believes that one of the downsides of the traditional family dynamic in education is that fathers are too often left out of the process, sometimes through no fault of their own. In this scenario, Mom is the one who stays home to take care of the kids and ends up getting involved with what's happening at school, while Dad has to watch from the sidelines because he spends all day at work.

"Dads so often don't have a role or a place in schools, and that's really unfortunate," Gleason said. "Most elementary schools have issues with dads not being nearly as active as moms. Many times, men only come into their child's school when there's a problem that needs to be addressed. So we definitely saw a need to get men more involved at our school."

Huron accomplished this goal by launching its own Watch D.O.G.S. program earlier this month. Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students) is an educational initiative of the National Center for Fathering. Its goals are to provide positive male role models for students, to reinforce the fact that education is important, and to supply extra sets of eyes and ears that will enhance school security and reduce bullying. The program is currently utilized by more than 4,500 K-12 schools in six countries and 46 U.S. states, including 166 in Michigan.

Watch D.O.G.S. members can be fathers, grandfathers, uncles, big brothers or any other responsible father figures. They volunteer for at least one full school day each year, wearing their official Watch D.O.G.S. T-shirts to identify them as welcome visitors. While at school, they perform a variety of valuable tasks, including monitoring the school entrances; assisting with the loading and unloading of buses and cars; patrolling the hallways, cafeteria and playground; and tutoring students in the classroom.

According to Gleason, "This is such a rewarding experience for both dads and students. These guys are not just sitting around in some back room making copies or filing paperwork. They are working directly with students all day long, including their own kids. They can see what their child's day looks like and build a closer relationship with everyone at school."

At Huron on Feb. 6, the Watch D.O.G.S. program had only been in effect for three days but already appeared to be making a positive impact. A handful of father figures were stationed at different areas of the school, moving between six different classrooms throughout the day, helping out with whatever was needed. Beyond the assistance that they provided, the volunteers seemed to generate excitement among students everywhere they went.

“We feel like rock stars with these shirts on,” said Kevin Cardinale, a father of two daughters in fourth and fifth grades. “All the kids walk by and want to high-five us. I think that for kids at this age, it’s really exciting to have their family members at school with them.”

For many dads, the most difficult part about becoming a Watch D.O.G.S. member is the time sacrifice from their job that it could require. But as Cardinale put it, “If you talk to most dads here, they quickly realize that it’s worth taking a day off work to do this for their kids.”

Cardinale is a firefighter, so he is fortunate to work a flexible schedule with some open days. Others — like Bob Conwell, the grandfather of twin girls in third grade — are retired and have enough free time to easily make it work.

“This gives me something useful to do during my retirement years,” he said. “I think it’s very important to provide good father figures at school for our kids and grandkids.”

Like Conwell, Dan Simons is a grandfather who jumped at the chance to be a Watch D.O.G.S. member and spend more time with his grandson, a first-grader at the school. He pointed out that the initiative reminds him of an old program at his children’s school in Port Washington, Wisconsin, years ago, in which dads would come in to help students read.

“This was an opportunity for me to get back to what I used to do with my own kids,” Simons said. “I think a lot of guys were ready to do this — we just needed an opportunity to make it happen.”

Huron principal Tara Koch first learned about Watch D.O.G.S. from a friend working in Davison Community Schools, located near Flint. Last fall, she and other Huron administrators made a trip up there to see the launch of this year’s program at her friend’s school. What she saw left a strong impression, and it convinced her that she needed to bring Watch D.O.G.S. to Huron.

“There’s nothing quite like seeing it in action,” Koch recalled. “I was like, ‘Are you kidding me? This is awesome!’ I just couldn’t believe the enthusiasm that it created.”

When Huron held its own launch event on Jan. 29, the response was equally enormous. Although the school only has about 500 students, a total of 108 father figures signed up to be Watch D.O.G.S. members on that opening night. Administrators were able to fill their calendar for the rest of the school year, signing up at least one volunteer per day through June. They had some help, though, from students recruiting their dads to participate.

“We held an assembly earlier that day where we really hyped the kids up about it,” Koch explained. “We had the song ‘Who Let the Dogs Out?’ playing on repeat.”

Ultimately, Koch believes that the Watch D.O.G.S. program will serve as an additional tool to provide Huron students with the guidance they need to perform well in school. She acknowledged that education is always a team effort.

“It takes a village to raise children — it really does,” she said. “I feel like this is going to be such a great growing experience for our school. I think it will really help build the school community with parents getting to know each other, the staff and the other students a lot better.”

Gleason was encouraged, although not surprised, to see that so many Huron fathers were willing to step up to the plate and help.

“Getting over 100 dads right off the bat was just remarkable,” she said. “We’re thrilled, but at the same time, we always felt like this program would catch on. We knew our community would respond because this fills a need at our school. We’re hoping this will open some new doors, break down those old social norms, and build a stronger connection between dads and education.”

But for as huge of an impact as the Watch D.O.G.S. program can have on students, Simons believes that the effect on father figures can be just as significant.

“For a lot of dads, school is something that’s only talked about around the supper table,” he said. “It’s not something that they experience firsthand. But this is changing that attitude, just by giving us a presence in the building. It’s getting dads back in touch with what’s happening in today’s education, and it’s helping them connect to their kids in a really positive and meaningful way.”

For more information on Watch D.O.G.S., visit www.fathers.com/watchdogs or call (888) 540-3647.

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