

Rotary Club Help at School

Overview: My Rotary Club tutors at an inner-city Seattle elementary school, where we also did a clothing drive, helped purchase new computers, and are considering a book drive, toy drive, and other projects to help the students.

For the past 10 years, members of my Rotary Club on Mercer Island, Washington, have been tutoring students at an inner-city elementary school in Seattle. About a dozen of us spend a couple of hours once a week at Van Asselt School, which recently changed its name to Rising Star.

Mercer Island is a mostly white, upper-middle-class suburb of Seattle. Rising Star is in a racially and ethnically diverse part of Seattle, with many lower-income and recent immigrant families. School officials tell us that their students' families speak 27 different languages in their respective homes. We tutor in kindergarten, first- and second-grade classes, working with kids who need help in reading, writing or math. The teachers, who often have two dozen or more kids to oversee, deeply appreciate our help. We cannot be disciplinarians, but we can provide individual attention and positive reinforcement.

In the first-grade class where I tutored last year, there was only one white student. The rest were black, brown and yellow: African-American, Hispanic-American and Asian-American. Several were from Muslim families; some of the girls wore hijabs.

My Rotarian tutoring group is mostly white, both men and women. Many of us are grandparents. Our goal is to help these kids gain basic skills they will need to succeed in our increasingly diverse and challenging nation and economy. Many studies show that if students cannot read well by the fourth grade, they are likely to struggle in middle- and high-school. They may drop out, join gangs, turn to crime or drugs, get pregnant, and fail as adults.

We tutors know that we cannot work miracles. We often carpool to the school together and discuss what works best with the students. We can usually tell which of them have supportive parents who encourage learning and which ones come from broken families. We know that some are from single-mother homes, without fathers to provide role models and instill values. We have limited ability to affect that widespread societal problem.

Still, we all have seen children respond enthusiastically to our presence in their classrooms. The kids call me "Mr. John" and some clap or hug me when I arrive each week. I try hard to learn all their names, and to identify those who need extra help.

We recently asked school officials what more we could do. They suggested we might have a clothing drive because some of the students do not have warm jackets, sweaters, boots, or other items needed for Seattle's rainy fall and winter seasons. We reached out to our fellow club members and collected clothing that we will deliver now that school has started. Our local Jewish Community Center donated 10 full bags from their lost-and-found room that otherwise would have gone to Goodwill.

We also found some funds in our club's community-grants account to help the school buy new computers. We are considering a book drive and helping in their library. We are asking for other ideas, and recently served lunch to about 100 teachers who were back to prepare for the start of the school year. They seemed to appreciate the pizza, salad, fruit and homemade cookies that our Rotary members provided.

For me, this has been a deeply rewarding experience and proof that a group of good-hearted folks from a fairly wealthy suburb can help students at an inner-city urban school in a direct, tangible, face-to-face, and personal way. These kids are, after all, the future of America. If they are left behind, all of us will suffer.