

Kaleva Norman Dickson Schools SEEDS programs aim to ensure students feel supported, have a place

Students engage through nature art projects, gardening, cooking, other projects

By [Kyle Kotecki](#), Manistee News Advocate Updated 5:08 pm EST, Friday, January 15, 2021

BRETHREN – Even through the pandemic, the Kaleva Norman Dickson Schools SEEDS programs have been supplementing students' education by providing social emotional support, hands-on learning opportunities, help with homework and more.

Joe Strouse, site coordinator for Brethren Middle School, said his main focus is social emotional learning and healthy eating.

"Especially with middle school-aged kids, I'm a big believer that in order for them to do well in school they need to be comfortable being in school," he said. "That's why we really hone in throughout the years in making sure that they know that they're supported, they have a place they can come and hang out and get some help with their homework."

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Strouse said the program also helps provide students with quality nutrition.

"When we would meet the kids at the food meetups this summer, we had activities that they did when we met them. One of the ones was rock painting," she said. "It was a really quick and easy craft they could do when we were meeting. That was cool because a lot of the kids did it and then we took the rocks and put it into our rock garden in our nature's classroom."

"They can get some cooking lessons and are able to take home some meals, because in these poor, rural areas food scarcity can definitely be an issue with some of our families," he said. "It's just nice to be able to support our communities in any way that we can."

Strouse's students have been helping fight food scarcity in their community by growing fresh vegetables and donating to food banks.

"We have a greenhouse at the school that we're able to make use of. We have fresh vegetables throughout the summertime and then we're able to use those in our cooking club or donate stuff to the local food banks," he said. "It's always a great thing that helps kids get a little bit of community pride and take ownership of the community. Getting kids to have a little dirt under their fingernails is always a good thing."

Denise Connolly, site coordinator for KND Elementary, said the elementary program has had to adapt to the pandemic.

"We've been remote since March," she said. "We were face to face for a little bit in October and November, but now we've gone back to being virtual, which means we send out learning kits to the kids every month."

Connolly said the learning kits are designed to get students away from their screens and into the great outdoors.

"We structure the learning boxes so that there's three weeks of activities. They can do the activities whenever they'd like, but then they report back to me on which activities they did," she said. "... I like to give the kids activities that get them outside. We have nature scavenger hunts, nature art projects and this summer we had them planting a pollinator garden.

"They're so zoned into screens, so we like to get them away from screens as much as possible."

The elementary students' January kits include a challenge to build a miniature dog sled.

"Every month we have some sort of engineering challenge," Connolly said. "... Kids really like those because they like the freedom to decide how they're going to do things and how they're going to solve the problem."

Strouse has also been providing his students with activity boxes, giving kids 10-20 hours' worth of activities every two weeks.

"It might be a tie-dye T-shirt, holiday ornaments or writing letters," he said. "Over the holiday break something they really loved is we sent home recipes and the stuff to make peanut butter fudge and make a cake. Again, finding ways to get them, with the food scarcity situation – especially around the holidays, some more nutrition.

"A lot of kids took that time to make those things with their parents, which is something we always encourage."

Strouse's students were also given the means to craft a homemade Christmas gift for a cherished family member.

"Over the break we sent home everything the kids needed to make hand soap – molds and all that stuff," Strouse said. "Kids were able to make that and then they had so much they were able to send out gifts to Grandma or Mom or whoever. That was a nice treat that we were able to do for them."

The elementary program will be holding SEEDS Zoom meetings from 3-4 p.m. on Thursdays throughout January.

"We just started with our Zoom meetings. We just had one and it didn't really go that well," Connolly said with a laugh. "With elementary kids, they're a little bit more scattered and they've been sitting for class all day, but we're going to keep trying. ... It's important that they really get to connect with the other kids, so we're trying to bring that to our Zoom meetings. Like I said, that was a challenge, but we're going to keep trying."

Connolly said her students will be able to meet in person in February, but there will be an 18-student limit.

"We had a lot more kids that wanted to sign up beyond that. When we have overages they are allowed to receive kits but they can't come in face to face," she said. "... We'll have about 12 kids that are remote besides our 18 face-to-face. It's definitely not a typical year. ... I really miss having the kids."

Strouse's students are offered 90-minute Zoom meetings Monday through Thursday.

"During that time, we kind of just have some meet and greet time where we talk about our day, then we do some homework help time and then we usually finish our day off with kids having a little bit of game time," he said. "We can play all sorts of different games so we can facilitate with them in the online realm. We have a good, dedicated group of kids that join us with that."

Middle school students are able to meet in person for three hours after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays for homework help, hands-on activities and social interaction, but the pandemic has caused transportation issues, which has limited the number of students able to participate.

"The school district of Brethren – square mileage-wise – is one of the largest in the state, so a lot of our families depend on having a bus," Strouse said. "In the past years we've offered a bus that will take kids to some drop-off spots after our programming. Unfortunately this year, with COVID, we haven't been able to do that."

Connolly, Strouse and their staffs have been pitching in with the to-go meal distribution at the school. Connolly said she created a library for kids during the summer and there were activities for the students at the meal pickup sites.