

Nerstrand Elementary School

Farmlands stretch for miles outside the windows of Nerstrand Elementary School. One gets the feeling that all is right with the world as such a beautiful area of southeast Minnesota unfolds before your eyes. Visitors to the school quickly discover the beauty of an exceptionally respectful school community inside, as well. A pervasive climate of respect permeates the halls and is evident throughout the day. Students and staff work together in mutually respectful relationships.

Nerstrand School encourages academic, social, and personal growth in each of its 154 Kindergarten through Grade 5 students. The school's strong community service program provides opportunities for students to improve in each of these key areas. One hundred percent of Nerstrand's students participate in school wide service opportunities throughout the year. As a result, students learn civic responsibility and (despite their ages) make significant contributions to the school, the community, and the world.

Ongoing service projects include restoring and reforesting a nearby prairie remnant and deciduous forest; hosting community lunches and elders coffees; and making sandwiches for a homeless shelter and placemats for a children's hospital.

Students have worked with an adult volunteer through the past five years to plan and develop a Peace Garden. The representations of England, Mexico, Canada, the U.S., Tanzania, Poland, Japan, China, and Australia grace the school's courtyard. Currently, a castle representing England is under construction. The Peace Garden is a reminder that each of us must make a daily commitment to peace-filled relationships and to making the world a better place. As an area in the garden is planned, students do research about the nation. They try to learn what life is like for a child there - the problems they encounter, the foods they eat, the games they play, and so on.

Our students and their parents have also contributed to a variety of world charities. One particularly memorable effort was collecting food and medical supplies, as well as sewing quilts, for the people of Guatemala.

Our students also honor local residents through service opportunities. Every household in our little town receives a colorful May basket containing a warm greeting and a small gift on May Day. In addition, our students and staff recognize two community elders each year by interviewing them about the stories of their lives. From that information, songs are created and performed at a Community Celebration. We've learned that even the most "common" among us have dramatic stories to tell- and there's always a life lesson to be learned from these wise, old people!

Nerstrand students assume some of the responsibility for caring for their school facility in a unique way, too. A group of 18 children volunteer to serve on the work crew each morning. These students, ages 5 to 11 years, set their alarm clocks and arrive early just to help the custodian with cleaning responsibilities! They cheerfully don gloves, grab rags, buckets, brooms, and dusters and set off to make the building "spiffy". These proud workers wash classroom tables, sweep the floor, sharpen pencils, clean the chalk trays, dust, wash lockers, and empty the recycling bins and wastebaskets.

Thirty students also volunteer to serve on rotating teams on the noon work crew. They give up their recess for the opportunity to help make the school day run smoothly. These student volunteers wash lunchroom tables, check that silverware isn't tossed, assist small children with their trays, sweep the floor, and help to ready the area for afternoon physical education classes. Being part of these work crews develops lifelong practices of service to others. These students have become excellent role models and leaders. It just goes to show that even menial tasks can foster self-esteem and friendships when the job serves a greater purpose.

Nerstrand School is proud of the many community service projects our students accomplish. More importantly, however, we are proud of the amazing students who make such incredible things happen.