

IG Spotlight:

ELL Students Learn Language and Life Skills with Help from BRIDGES “Buddies”

Philip G. Coburn Elementary School in West Springfield, MA, is a multicultural ELL (English Language Learners) school, where over thirty-three languages are spoken, and students come from primarily low-income homes. Its dedicated teachers work tirelessly to provide these



students with the best English learning instruction possible. School, however, is just one piece of a child’s learning environment, with home being another important piece. And unfortunately, for many children at Coburn, parents are simply maxed out trying to make ends meet to spend time helping budding learners.

“Many of our students have immigrated to the U.S....and many also come from broken homes where parents may be working two or more jobs, and can’t give [their children] the moments to sit and talk and share experiences,” says Emily O’Brien, a Title I Math Specialist at Coburn. Her colleague, 4th grade teacher Joe Canata, adds, “A lot of these kids don’t really interact with adults other than teachers.”

Despite having less adult one-on-one time outside of school, many students in this learning community are becoming more proficient in English language skills, while also feeling supported and valued. **Teachers attribute these successes, in large part, to the nationally renowned BRIDGES: Growing Together program**, which allows students and senior adults to spend meaningful time together and to learn from one another. **BRIDGES: Growing Together** provides award-winning training that encourages and equips schools to design their own intergenerational programs. Older adult volunteers and 3rd – 6th grade youth are then united in the classroom for educational and meaningful hands-on projects. At Coburn Elementary, where BRIDGES began in 2014, the results have been overwhelmingly positive.



“The kids love their ‘BRIDGES Buddies,’ and they look forward to seeing them all week,” says O’Brien. **“And the English impact is HUGE...as a language model, it’s been immeasurable.”**

In addition to improved language skills, the connection with older adults fills a gap that's often missing in these children's lives. "For many of our students whose families have immigrated...the grandparents can't come with the family," says O'Brien. "...so having their



BRIDGES Buddies is like having a physical piece of their grandparent who's not here."

The program is equally as rich and as important for its volunteers. BRIDGES provides older adults with countless opportunities for learning, connections, and joy, simply by spending time with children, guided by a tried and true format. A recent visit to Mr. Canata's 4th grade classroom, which was abuzz with conversation and laughter as students and their BRIDGES Buddies sewed, stuffed, and decorated felt teddy bears, proved just that. It was the culmination of an "heirloom" unit that began several weeks earlier with the book "The Keeping Quilt" by Patricia Polacco.

"I love the kids," says retired school teacher and BRIDGES volunteer, Mary Long. "We just talk and talk. They're learning, and I'm learning," she says with a smile. One of the kids is Abigail who adds: "I like the sewing, and I like being with the BRIDGES Buddies. "I'm learning more about them, and about my classmates, too."

"We're learning about sewing, and we're also learning about each other's countries, and about getting along," says BRIDGES volunteer, Julia Davis. "[The students are] just so open. And the stereotypes? About [my] generation? Gone."



O'Brien says the BRIDGES program is like a proverbial pause button. "We get to slow down for a moment, and remind ourselves what matters...it's about connection, and it's about good old-fashioned sweetness."

Nine-year-old Serenity agrees. "It's not all about doing something...it's about having fun and being together."