



All Students Matter

By Barbara Wood



It's just after Friday morning recess and the students in Cassandra Wicker's first-grade classroom at Belle Haven School are lined up to go back to class. Grins emerge as the students see a familiar face appear, that of Carolyn Blatman, who volunteers in their classroom each Friday morning.

Ms. Blatman gets hugs and greetings as she helps shepherd the not-very-linear line of boys and girls back to their classroom.

Inside, the students find their way back to their seats. Two students, Omar and SeBrina, sit down at a kid-sized curved table with Ms. Blatman between them, to work on a writing assignment. Ms. Blatman's attention swings back and forth between the two, offering encouragement and answering questions, while Ms. Wicker scurries around the room trying to do the same for the 21 other students in her class.

Ms. Blatman, like three other volunteers from All Students Matter, spends an hour each week in Ms. Wicker's classroom. The volunteers follow Ms. Wicker's direction, usually spending a half hour with two groups of two students, working on either reading or writing.

Their presence means students who Ms. Wicker thinks could benefit the most from a half-hour of adult attention get just that. As a first-year teacher, she can count on the volunteers' consistent presence.

"I'm tremendously impressed with her teaching skills," Ms. Blatman said. "She's very dedicated to the kids and puts in a lot of extra hours," she said. "She's got a classroom full of tremendously struggling students."

How it started

Nine years ago, Atherton's Ann Carter made a commitment to volunteer for at least an hour a week, not in her own children's classroom, but in a classroom in the Ravenswood City School District.

Ms. Carter, one of the founders of All Students Matter, has been steadily volunteering in Ravenswood district classrooms ever since, but now she is joined by about 200 other trained volunteers who have all made the same commitment she did.

"It's a small commitment and a big payoff," Ms. Carter said of her work for the nonprofit volunteer group. "You see the joy of kids when you walk in, and they scream and run and want hugs."

All Students Matter began in 2008 with three founders and a couple dozen friends. This fall, the organization plans to serve six Ravenswood schools in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park with at least 230 volunteers in transitional kindergarten through fifth-grade classrooms, serving about 2,000 students.

The organization trains the volunteers, provides two site directors for each school, and sponsors monthly coffees with speakers and volunteer support. It has one half-time paid employee, also a volunteer.

Teachers request volunteers for the activities they want help with, usually working one-on-one or in very small groups with students on reading, writing and math skills.

"It's just great for the teachers to have another adult in there," Ms. Carter said.

The district's view

Ravenswood Superintendent Gloria Hernandez-Goff said All Students Matter is part of the district's "family of caring friends and partners."

"They believe in our students and teachers, and are committed to partnering with us to help our students realize their true

Photos by Irene Searles

Above: Keri Tully, All Students Matter's only paid (half-time) employee, also volunteers for the organization, as she's doing here with Guillermo in his first-grade classroom at Belle Haven Elementary School in Menlo Park. **Below:** Itzanamy reads to All Students Matter volunteer and board member Jeanette Kennedy in Lauren Majchrowicz's fourth-grade class at Belle Haven school. **About the cover:** First-grader Aliza works with All Students Matter volunteer May Herr in Cassandra Wicker's Belle Haven school classroom.

potential. We feel deep gratitude” for their support, she said.

The group’s volunteers invest “their time and talents in our district for the pure joy of helping children and teachers,” she said. “They are always willing to roll up their sleeves to help us with whatever we need, for nothing in return. In a constantly changing environment, their selfless and flexible support has made them an invaluable part of our community.”

The founders

Back in 2008, Ms. Carter attended the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (now Menlo Church) with Carol Chalmers of Palo Alto and Sharon Purcell of Menlo Park. The three started talking about how their children’s classrooms had more volunteers than they could use. Some schools chose room parents by lottery, and field trips often had more drivers than needed.

Partially by looking to the example of their pastor, Charley Scandlyn, who had taken a year off to start the Ravenswood Education Foundation, they realized there was a district right next door that could use some help.

The three women are still on the organization’s board of directors and classroom volunteers. Ms. Carter is the board chair, and a member of the Ravenswood Education Foundation board.

Carolyn Bowsher

Carolyn Bowsher from Menlo Park is a new All Students Matter volunteer. Her own children, now in middle and high school, “don’t need me as much,” she said. “I feel like the kids” at Belle Haven School where she volunteers “need me more,” she said.

A former member of the Menlo Atherton Education Foundation board and Parent Teacher Organization president, she said she feels “like I am making a difference” by volunteering for All Students Matter. “I feel that I’m needed and wanted and loved.”

She said she admires the teacher she works with, who has been with the district for two decades. “There really are some very good teachers who are there because they’re passionate about teaching and want to be there,” she said.

She’s bonded with her students and thinks she’ll follow them to first grade next year. “I would love to stay with them,” she said. “But then I really love this teacher.”

“Maybe next year I could try to do both,” working again with the teacher as well as in a first-grade classroom with her current students, she said.

The classroom volunteering “really can be kind of addictive,” she said. “You see a tangible difference you’re making.”

Carolyn Blatman

Palo Alto’s Carolyn Blatman, the group’s unpaid executive director, joined All Students Matter in 2009 and currently volunteers in classrooms four days a week.

Volunteers must commit to be in the same classroom for at least one hour at the same time every week, she said. “We’re one of the rare adults consistently in the classroom, and in their lives, maybe,” Ms. Blatman said.

However, she emphasized, the group is there to help



Photo by Irene Searles

Jaazanaih reads to All Students Matter volunteer Christina Lee in Cassandra Wicker’s Belle Haven school classroom. Ms. Lee comes to the classroom at least once a week for an hour, working with students one-on-one or in very small groups.

the district, not to “fix” it. We don’t believe the idea of there being a ‘magic bullet,’” she said. “There isn’t. These kids need time and attention.”

All Students Matter volunteers believe that providing classroom volunteers is the best way to help the Ravenswood district. “The real need is for boots on the ground,” Ms. Blatman said. “‘Things’ aren’t going to be the solution in the classroom. I think it’s going to be people.”

Ms. Blatman used her business background to help organize and grow the organization, which has expanded slowly, adding about 35 or 40 volunteers a year and additional grades and schools each year.

Jeanette Kennedy

Atherton’s Jeanette Kennedy, a long-time volunteer who serves on the All Students Matter board and helps with planning and marketing for the group, said about half the volunteers are from Palo Alto, with others from Menlo Park, Atherton, Los Altos, Woodside and Portola Valley.

“We’re there to help the district, the teachers and the principals,” she said. “I think we as group feel a passion for early literacy.”

Most volunteers stay three to five years, she said, and about a third are former teachers. However, she said, because All Students Matter provides training, “if you’ve read books to your own children,” you’re qualified.

Keri Tully

All Students Matter has one paid staff member, Menlo Park’s Keri Tully, who works 20 hours a week as the program director, training and scheduling volunteers and providing support. She’s a former teacher who taught in Los Angeles and New York City districts similar to Ravenswood.

This year she’s been working in a fifth-grade

classroom, to see what training the group will need to expand to that grade level.

She’s been with a group of three fifth-grade girls reading books and discussing them in depth. “They could use an adult in their lives who has the time to talk about a book with them,” she said. “It’s just really, really fun.”

Ms. Tully’s own children, now in high school and college, went to the Las Lomas Elementary School District. The students in the Ravenswood district are “just as bright and just as deserving, but don’t have the same student support network,” she said. “There are just some who aren’t going to make it without extra support.”

“If we can be that one adult each week that the child can have some special time with, that really makes a big difference,” Ms. Tully said.

“Their parents are working really hard. They’re living in really difficult conditions. They’re trying to get food on the table and a roof over their head,” Ms. Tully said.

She also emphasized that the volunteers “are here to support students where they are.”

“In no way do we feel that we’re coming across town to save these kids,” she said. “We just want to support them and help them grow.”

“They’re learning at whatever level they’re at, and we teach them at that level,” she said. “We really try to go into the classroom with humility and much respect.”

All Students Matter volunteers use the same materials teachers do and work to “support the teacher in precisely what the teacher is doing,” she said. “We want to make sure we’re meeting a teacher’s needs.”

Ms. Tully said there are few requirements for being an All Students Matter volunteer. “You’ve just got to love kids,” she said, “have a passion for helping children learn and love being around them.” ■

How to volunteer

All Students Matter is now recruiting volunteers for the 2017-18 school year.

At is.gd/ASM_vol prospective volunteers can sign up on the organization’s website. They will be contacted with more information.

Training is in September, and volunteers start in classrooms at the end of that month and continue volunteering until mid-May.

The group often has a volunteer waitlist, but usually has been able to place all of them.

AllStudentsMatter.org has more information.

Who are the Ravenswood students?

The latest statistics from the Ravenswood City School District, where All Students Matter currently provides about 200 classroom volunteers, show a very different study body from that of neighboring districts.

This year, district representatives said, 40 percent of Ravenswood students are considered homeless. (The state definition includes those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence or who share other’s housing.)

Nearly all the district students, 95 percent, qualify for free meals and 65 percent of the students are still learning English.

The latest state test results show that 83 percent of Ravenswood students had not met their grade level standards in English language arts and literacy and 88 percent were below the grade level standards in math.



Photo by Irene Searles

Alexandra, Emily and Omar, all students in Cassandra Wicker’s Belle Haven school first-grade classroom, practice their reading. Ms. Wicker has volunteers from All Students Matter in her classroom four times a week, working with the students she thinks could most use individualized attention.