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GRAND HAVEN, MI – At a time when community support is more important than ever before, Grand Haven Area Schools is proud of the fact that they take every opportunity to connect students with service and philanthropy organizations. Earlier this year, GHAPS administrators asked a challenging question: how can we blend hands-on learning with philanthropy and create an opportunity to engage students who were not already involved in other extracurricular activities? The answer brought together GHAPS students and the Greater Ottawa County United Way for an exciting project-based learning experience. [Photographs here](#).

Prior to the COVID-19 school closure, GHAPS Executive Director of Instructional Services and former United Way campaign chair Mary Jane Evink suggested the district focus on a student engagement and learning opportunity to raise awareness about philanthropy and what it means. According to Evink, “We identified the United Way as the ‘who’ we wanted the students to learn about, but other than that we wanted to leave the roadmap up to the students.”

Kris Bettisworth, Lakeshore Middle School teacher and current United Way campaign chair, stepped up to facilitate the program. She was overjoyed at the opportunity to work with students in a different capacity from her daily routine. Fourteen middle school students used their “Connections” time – the last 35 minutes of the school day – to participate in the pilot program to “teach philanthropy” to younger students by creating presentations to educate them about United Way and its various services.

Patrick Moran, president of the Greater Ottawa County United Way, met with the middle school students to provide context. Many of the teens had no prior knowledge of United Way and the services it provides to the community. Following the meeting, students conducted their own research to learn how non-profits raise money.

“It was very rewarding to see students who had never worked with one another research United Way, ask questions and learn how non-profits get matching donations,” said Bettisworth. “They exhibited creativity, collaboration and teamwork. I was very proud of what they accomplished in three weeks.”

The educational presentation approaches developed by the students ranged from an online trivia game to the creation of a new superhero. Each presentation was designed to appeal to elementary students and help them understand philanthropy. The project was completed prior to school closing for the year.

Grand Haven Area Public Schools is a district of distinction for students in preschool through 12th grade. With a goal of providing exceptional educational experiences, GHAPS is committed to success for all students and strives to provide exemplary programs and opportunities to meet the diverse needs of students.

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