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Delaware schools: New program has dads taking their turn in the classroom

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In most elementary schools, it's the mothers who attend PTA meetings, chaperone field trips and volunteer in the classroom.

<http://www.brandywineschools.org>">**Brandywine School District's** Mount Pleasant Elementary School is trying to change that through a new program called Dragon Dads.

"Traditionally, more mothers tend to participate in the elementary school environment, and I wanted to see more fathers involved," said Assistant Principal Ned Gladfelter, who created the program earlier this school year.

Dragon Dads typically brings four fathers into the school to volunteer each week. The dads greet the students as they arrive in the morning, visit their child's classroom, participate in recess and help out in the cafeteria.

"In the past, some fathers came in to have lunch with their children, or they would come in for a meeting and leave after an hour," Gladfelter said. "I wanted them to spend more quality time with their children and get more male role models into our building on a regular basis."

On a recent morning, Josh Ostroff stood in his stepdaughter's kindergarten classroom reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. When it came time for the morning announcements over the loudspeaker and Gladfelter declared Ostroff as the Dragon Dad of the day, Madison Terry's face lit up. Ostroff, who teaches karate at American Karate Studio in Bellefonte, then helped lead the class in a group exercise activity including jumping jacks, shoulder shrugs and arm circles.

"I love working with children and instilling good character traits," he said. "I think there's a different kind of bond between a child and a male figure. For children to see a male active in their life is really important."

After hearing Gladfelter talk about the need for father participation at kindergarten orientation earlier this year, Joe Bennett knew he needed to take time out of his busy schedule as a surgeon at Christiana Hospital to be a Dragon Dad.

Bennett said his daughter, Lexa, was so excited to have her picture taken and posted on the Dragon Dad bulletin board.

"It's such a big deal when you are in kindergarten," he said.

Bennett said what he liked most about the program was actually getting to participate instead of just observing.

"It really sends a good message to your children to show you are involved as a father," he said.

Gladfelter said the program has been so successful that he hopes to expand it to other schools in the district next year.

"We are getting more men in the building, and it's really meaningful," he said.

Kathryn Tullis, Mount Pleasant's PTA president, said there's been a significant increase in the number of fathers attending PTA meetings and volunteering to help in extracurricular activities around the school since the Dragon Dads program began.

"The program has been a great door for more men to take an active role in their child's education and school community," she said.

Some fathers have enjoyed being a Dragon Dad so much, they are signing up for a second time.

Mark Lucey, a commercial lender for Artisan's Bank, said despite working long hours, he wants to be involved in his daughter's education.

That's why he jumped at the opportunity to be a Dragon Dad.

"I remember when I was a kid how my parents were always involved. My mom volunteered at the school, and my father coached sports teams," he said.

Lucey, whose wife Jenna is active in the school's PTA and volunteers at the school several times a month, said the program was "really rewarding and satisfying." Not only did Lucey sit in on Celia's kindergarten class, but he helped first-graders work on their art projects and ate lunch with Celia and her friends.

"After I saw what kind of an impact [the program] had on my daughter, I can't wait to do it again," he said. "I'm signed up to be a Dragon Dad again on her birthday."
