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## **With about 600 kids in programming, St. Mark Youth Enrichment making local impact**

BY ALLIE HINGA [allie.hinga@thmedia.com](mailto:allie.hinga@thmedia.com) Oct 9, 2018

About 20 children split up into three groups in the Audubon Elementary School gym in Dubuque to play a game of "Jeopardy!"

To earn points, the students in St. Mark Youth Enrichment's after-school program selected from categories that mixed academics and popular culture — science, movies, math, TV shows and spelling.

One team selected math for 500 points, and the students hunched over sheets of paper as they scrambled to work out the average of three numbers.

"We try to disguise their learning," said Dawn Cogan, executive director of St. Mark. "So they think they're having fun, but they're learning."

St. Mark Youth Enrichment serves nearly 600 students around Dubuque County through its before- and after-school programming, summer academy, school supply efforts and other offerings.

The organization is celebrating 30 years of operation, which Cogan attributes to the community's support and understanding of the value that St. Mark adds.

"What we do isn't just about having care for kids after school," she said. "This is about keeping kids in school, making sure that they graduate from high school ... which then impacts post-secondary education, which then impacts workforce development."

## **SERVING CHILDREN**

St. Mark Youth Enrichment focuses on helping students develop academically, socially and emotionally.

The organization provides a mix of before- and after-school programming at seven schools — four in Dubuque, two in the Western Dubuque Community School District and at Seton Catholic School in Peosta.

During after-school programs, students sit down for a snack with staff, work on motor and social skills through play, participate in academic enrichment activities and receive help with their homework.

Cogan said social-emotional learning is woven into everything staff do, and helping students feel they belong is key.

"Every single interaction with the child helps them feel safe and connected and cared about," she said.

Akaela Hammerand, a second-grader at Audubon, has participated in St. Mark programming since kindergarten. She said she particularly enjoys playing dodgeball and having free time. They also work on spelling and math, she said.

"It's fun here, like all the time," she said.

Fifth-grader Gabriel Canada also has been in St. Mark programming since kindergarten. He said he appreciates how nice and helpful the staff is.

"They've helped us with a lot of things, and we appreciate it," he said.

Audubon Elementary Principal Ed Glaser said St. Mark's before- and after-school programming is unique because it is focused on enrichment and is well connected with the schools. St. Mark staff take feedback from school officials to improve their programming, he said.

"They're helping a lot of kids and a lot of families, but also our staff benefits from it every day," Glaser said.

St. Mark staff also offer programming for students during the summer months. Each year, they give school supplies to families who need them. They help secure warm clothing for children during the holidays.

Stacy Stechman has three children in St. Mark programming and a fourth who was involved when he was younger. She credited the St. Mark staff with helping her oldest son, Wolfgang, learn to like reading, which he used to hate.

"They helped him overcome that," she said. "They were one of the people that helped him overcome his fear of reading."

## GIVING HOPE

Another key to St. Mark's work is serving students who come from impoverished backgrounds, who make up many of the students in their programs.

Five of the schools at which the organization provides before- and after-school programming are Title I buildings, which are identified as having a high number of students from low-income families. While there is a cost to attend before- and after-school care, more than 80 percent of St. Mark students attend on a scholarship and do not have to pay.

This school year, St. Mark was able to give school supplies to more than 1,900 students through its Apples for Students effort — though many more local students are in need of them, Cogan said.

Such efforts help children get ready to learn and to realize there is a community that cares about them, she said.

"If you want to figure out how to end poverty, then you have to make sure that people have hope and that they have a community that they can count on," Cogan said.

Staff also help supply children in their programs with warm winter clothes and, last year, helped secure bedding and pillows for students. They also seek to meet children's needs through the course of their other programming in other ways.

St. Mark's 30 years of serving students reflect the community's care for youth, as well as the organization's continued focus on serving students, Cogan said.

"What we are getting better at, that has helped us to still be here and will help us to be here forever, is really focusing on what we have the capacity to impact," she said.

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More information about St. Mark Youth Enrichment is available at [stmarkyouthenrichment.org](http://stmarkyouthenrichment.org).

Information about Dubuque schools programming is available by emailing [mseier@stmarkyouthenrichment.org](mailto:mseier@stmarkyouthenrichment.org), and information about Western Dubuque and Seton Catholic School programming is available at [amcdonough@stmarkyouthenrichment.org](mailto:amcdonough@stmarkyouthenrichment.org).

Some programs have a waiting list, and children must attend school at the site where programming is held.