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Contact: Chris Duffy  
[duffy@goffpublic.com](mailto:duffy@goffpublic.com)  
612-599-7982

## **DARTS celebrates 25 years of connecting retirees with local classrooms**

*Learning Buddies volunteers have mentored more than 75,000 Minnesota students since 1997*

**West. St. Paul, Minn. – Jan. 12, 2022** – West St. Paul-based nonprofit [DARTS](#) today announced the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its beloved [Learning Buddies](#) program, which connects older adult volunteers – many of whom are retired – with students in kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade on a weekly basis. The Learning Buddies program is active in nine school districts in Dakota, Scott and Ramsey counties. [Click here](#) to watch a video commemorating 25 years of the Learning Buddies program.

Facilitated by DARTS and supported primarily by [Flint Hills Resources](#), 130 Learning Buddies volunteers currently serve 200 Minnesota classrooms. Learning Buddies provides an intergenerational approach to learning, with volunteers supporting and enhancing students in the areas of reading, spelling, vocabulary, science and math, along with providing critical social-emotional connections.

Founded in 1997, Learning Buddies has grown from an effort in a single school – Glacier Hills Elementary School in Eagan – to 47 school partnerships. Since it began, this intergenerational program has served more than 75,000 students and logged more than 113,000 volunteer hours.

“We are so proud to celebrate 25 years of the Learning Buddies program connecting generations and enriching our communities,” said Erin Walloch, DARTS Learning Buddies program manager. “Learning Buddies are beloved members of their school communities, and the teachers, students and volunteers involved all benefit so much from this program.”

Studies have shown that intergenerational learning is beneficial to both students and adults. Interacting with adults other than one’s parents can enhance a child’s social and cognitive development. Because of the one-on-one and small group settings, Learning Buddies help meet students’ individual needs, encouraging them to ask questions and develop a deeper understanding of what they are studying. In turn, older adults who regularly interact with children are more likely to show delayed mental decline, lower blood pressure, and overall increased happiness. Year after year, Learning Buddies volunteers have said they feel fulfilled by the experience.

“It is incredibly rewarding to connect with these young students and watch them have light-bulb moments when they solve a problem or learn something new,” said Michele Mueller, a Learning Buddies volunteer of five years. “During the most challenging days of the pandemic I was especially grateful that we could connect virtually, and it felt like the students were equally excited to see me.”

In recent school years, the program has adapted to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic to provide virtual opportunities for volunteers to connect with students, such as recording and reading books to students via Zoom. Hundreds of students and volunteers also participate in a Pen Pals program, which includes monthly letter exchanges and a year-end virtual gathering for pals to connect.

“For 25 years, Learning Buddies has truly enriched the lives of everyone involved,” said Heather Rein, director of community affairs at Flint Hills Resources Pine Bend refinery in Rosemount. “We are grateful to the volunteers who generously give their time, the teachers who welcome the buddies into their classrooms and the staff at DARTS who work tirelessly to facilitate this incredible program.”

[Click here](#) to download photos of DARTS Learning Buddies volunteers.

### **About DARTS**

DARTS creates connections that enrich aging. We provide practical services for older adults in their home, answer questions through an information hotline, keep people mobile with accessible ride services, and support family caregivers of elders with resources, coaching, and education. We engage all ages in volunteering, moving passions to actions, and we build community through innovative partnerships. More information about DARTS is available at [DartsConnects.org](https://DartsConnects.org).

### **About Flint Hills Resources**

Flint Hills Resources, LLC, through its subsidiaries, is an industry leader in refining, chemicals, and grain processing, with operations primarily in Texas and the Midwest. Flint Hills Resources’ subsidiaries produce and market gasoline, diesel, jet fuel, asphalt, ethanol, biodiesel, liquified natural gas, olefins, polymers, intermediate chemicals, as well as base oils, corn oil and dried distillers grain. Based in Wichita, Kansas, the company has approximately 3,300 employees and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Koch Industries, Inc. [www.fhr.com](http://www.fhr.com).

The Flint Hills Resources Pine Bend refinery produces transportation fuels used throughout the Midwest, including most of Minnesota’s gasoline, diesel fuel, jet fuel, as well as other products people rely on such as propane and asphalt. Located 17 miles southeast of Minneapolis, Pine Bend has a refining capacity of 375,000 barrels per day and is among the most efficient and safest oil refineries in the country. Flint Hills Resources directly and indirectly supports more than 4,000 Minnesota jobs and has invested nearly \$1.7 billion in upgrades and improvements to its Minnesota facilities since 2010. With 1,000 full-time employees, the Flint Hills Resources Pine Bend refinery is one of the largest employers in Dakota County. More information about the Pine Bend refinery is available at [PineBendRefinery.com](https://PineBendRefinery.com).

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