

Best Buddies

Creating Connections, Fostering Friendships

By Olivia Ganoë, River Valley High School

The “Best Buddies” program is a cornerstone of friendship and inclusion within the River Valley school community, fostering student connections. Students across all grades join this program to build bonds, nurture inclusive friendships with peers of all abilities, and promote kindness. They participate in a variety of school activities, including field trips and parties.

Best Buddies was founded in 1987 by Anthony Kennedy Shriver, an American activist for people with disabilities. Approximately 13,000 middle schools and 60,000 high schools internationally participate in Best Buddies programs. Our students joined this program in the early 2010s and paused briefly due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Best Buddies was reinstated in the fall of 2023 at the suggestion of students in the Rising Educators program. Eight staff members and nearly 90 students participate in the program. All students are welcome to join during sign-ups at the beginning of the school year.



The Best Buddies program aims to help special education and general education students bond and create friendships with each other. Best Buddies participants organized memorable events such as a trick-or-treat day, crafting blankets for Beacon Ridge residents at Christmas, and a Valentine’s Day ice cream social where they made cards for nursing home residents.

The Best Buddies program and Seniors Supporting Seniors took a trip on February 13 to Beacon Ridge for a Mardi Gras party. They are looking forward to more activities this spring, including a bowling trip and a Pirates game.



"Our students genuinely look forward to their time together, creating an environment where everyone feels valued and connected. This sense of belonging and mutual support is key to shaping our positive school culture."

- Mrs. Karen Magalich,
Best Buddies Advisor

Members of the Best Buddies program talk with their buddies at least once a week. In addition, students attend Best Buddies events each month. Best Buddies has two separate monthly meetings, one for staff and one for student advisory. Some of the topics for staff advisory meetings are budgeting, activity planning, and fundraising. Student meetings revolve around socializing, crafts, and participating in activities planned by the student advisory.

New District Video



Discover what makes River Valley School District more than just a place of learning. Watch the brand new video that celebrates the unique story of our school district, showcasing a commitment to excellence, innovation, and a passion for learning.



[Watch Now!](#)

BES Athena Club's Wasteless Wednesdays

Blairsville Elementary Athena Club took a big step with the launch of the "Wasteless Wednesday" program. This Athena Club project highlights the importance of recycling and showcases the power of student leadership and collaboration.

Motivated to make a difference, they proposed starting a recycling program within their school. The plan was simple yet effective – set up three bins in the lunchroom every Wednesday to collect plastic, paper, and cans. With the help of their Athena Club Advisor, Mrs. Antonacci, and the approval of BES Principal, Mr. Higginbotham, the students turned their vision into reality.



The launch of Wasteless Wednesdays was met with enthusiasm across the school. Club members went above and beyond to ensure the program's success, from creating eye-catching posters to engaging directly with fellow students about the importance of recycling. The Athena Club's efforts paid off, with students across all grades eagerly participating in the initiative.

The project allowed the Athena Club members to apply their RIASEC themes, from **Artistic** students who designed the promotional materials to the **Enterprising** individuals who enjoyed the challenge of launching the project. **Investigative** and **Realistic** themes were also represented, with students conducting research and handling the logistical aspects of the program. The **Social** helpers embraced the community service aspect of the project.

"I'm really proud of the effort our students have put into launching the Wasteless Wednesday initiative. They've worked hard and shown great commitment to improving our environment, and it's inspiring to see them turning their ideas into action."
- Mrs. Diane Antonacci, Athena Club Advisor

The Athena Club empowers young girls to become leaders and fosters personal growth while also contributing to the community. Beyond Wasteless Wednesdays, the club has been involved in various projects, including a pet supply drive for the Indiana County Humane Society, Operation Christmas Child, and community and trail cleanups.

RVMS Students Discover the Magic of Manufacturing

This year, a team of seventh graders from River Valley Middle School is taking on the challenge of the What's So Cool About Manufacturing video contest. Our River Valley team is competing in the Pittsburgh East Region with teams from ten schools in surrounding counties.

The team partnered with Miller Fabrication Solutions in Homer City to answer "What's So Cool About Manufacturing?" with a two-minute commercial.

Under the guidance of Mrs. Weir, with technical support from Mr. Studnicki, and coaching by Mr. Buckles, the students have shown remarkable teamwork and dedication. Their journey began with two visits to Miller Fabrication Solutions – the first to brainstorm and plan their video and the second to capture their vision on film.

From the initial stages of research, storyboarding, and scripting, each team member brought their unique strengths to the table. With their blend of **Artistic** and **Realistic** RIASEC themes, the camera operators captured compelling visuals that tell a story. The producers used their **Enterprising** skills to spearhead the storyboarding and scripting process. Their creative and big-picture thinking propelled the project forward, setting a strong foundation for a captivating video.

Meanwhile, on-screen talent and interviewers applied their **Investigative** skills to craft meaningful questions for Miller employees to reveal the exciting and innovative aspects of the manufacturing industry, and students with **Conventional** interests excelled at project management.

This dynamic application of RIASEC themes underscores the project's educational value beyond the immediate task of creating the video. It offered students an exceptional opportunity to apply their strengths, interests, and values in a real-world context, encouraging them to explore potential career paths and develop skills that are valuable in any field.

The team's project will debut on the What's So Cool About Manufacturing website in April. Stay tuned for the video launch, and join us in supporting our team by casting your vote for the Viewer's Choice Award!



Rising Educators: A New Era of Teaching Talent

STEAM Academy program paves the way for aspiring teachers



The STEAM Academy is at the forefront of addressing the urgent need for more educators through its innovative Rising Educators program. Last year's graduates went on to pursue careers in early childhood education, special education, educational psychology, and occupational therapy. With ten new students joining in the 2023-2024 school year and benefiting from dual enrollment in college classes, the program is setting a solid foundation for the future of teaching.

A standout feature of the Rising Educators program is its comprehensive approach to career exploration. The RIASEC framework drives career exploration and helps students see the options available based on their strengths, interests, and values. Rising Educators teacher Mrs. Karen Magalich described one of her students' journeys into career discovery. Speech pathology emerged as a potential career option based on the student's RIASEC themes. Initially unfamiliar with the field, she spent three weeks shadowing a district speech pathologist, an experience that solidified her career choice.



Coursework is rigorous, diving deep into psychology, early childhood development, diagnostics, evaluations, pedagogy, assistive technology, and educational law. After three years in the program, students will leave with up to 21 college credits from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), Saint Francis University, and Westmoreland County Community College (WCCC). New this year is American Sign Language through WCCC and Early Childhood Pedagogy with Saint Francis University.

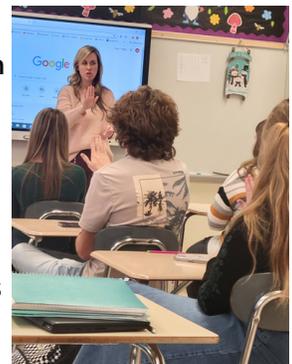
Beyond academics, the Rising Educators program emphasizes leadership and active participation within the school community. Students have taken



significant strides in promoting a culture of inclusion and engagement by relaunching initiatives such as Best Buddies and planning the Annual Autism Awareness Day. Their involvement extends to enriching experiences like educational field trips to the Carnegie Science Center, where they apply their learning in real-world contexts.

Rising Educators students Emma Prenni and Lilly Buckles were selected to present this month at the Pennsylvania Department of Education Conference. Their "Pathways for Future Special Educators" session showcases the knowledge and skills developed through the Rising Educators program.

Central to the Rising Educators experience is the mentorship each student receives, pairing them with mentor teachers to facilitate practical classroom experience. This hands-on approach ensures that theoretical knowledge is complemented by practical teaching skills, preparing students for a seamless transition into the education sector.



Rising Educators nurtures a new generation of educators by offering a pathway that combines college credit opportunities, mentorship, and active community participation, laying the groundwork for a bright future in education, one student at a time.

The River Valley STEAM Academy offers programs in Biomedical Technology, Cybersecurity, Electrical Occupations and Powerline, Esports, Pathways to Health Professions, Rising Educators, Sports Medicine and Rehabilitative Therapy, and Welding Technology.

For more information, visit www.rvsteamacademy.org or call 724-343-3230.



CodeJoy Brings the World of Robotics to SES Classrooms

Saltsburg Elementary students recently had the exciting opportunity to dive into the world of robotics and coding with CodeJoy. This innovative program brought interactive online lessons into their 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade classrooms, offering a blend of learning and fun. The enriching virtual sessions taught skills such as pattern recognition, decomposition of problems, pattern abstraction, and algorithmic design.



In the first class, "Robot Rovers," students helped a virtual pet rover navigate through various challenges. This session not only captivated their imagination but also deepened their understanding of wheel speeds and ratios. In "Robot Relaxation," our students helped a little robot manage stress by programming LED animations and learning valuable skills in loops and pause blocks along the way.

The learning didn't stop at the screen. In January, the CodeJoy team, including co-founder and host Kelsey Derringer, visited Saltsburg Elementary and the STEAM Academy. Kindergarten students showed off their skills coding Finch Robots with the CodeJoy team.



The partnership brought broader benefits as well. River Valley participated in the ABC Create L.E.A.D.S. pilot program this year, facilitated by CodeJoy. In addition to the virtual coding lessons for elementary students, River Valley teachers benefited from free professional development sessions, and the district received 79 free robots to use in the classrooms! This collaboration emphasizes the importance of digital literacy and innovation in education and equips students with the skills they need for the future.

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I'm thrilled about the opportunity we have to earn free robots and professional development. I'm thankful to see so many teachers diving into the top-notch trainings. Their enthusiasm will pave the way for our students to embrace computational thinking across all subjects, opening doors to endless possibilities.

- Mrs. Sarah Kral, Computer Science/AI Facilitator

UPCOMING EVENTS

EARLY DISMISSAL	MARCH 13	HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL	MARCH 22-24
EARLY DISMISSAL	MARCH 27	EASTER/SPRING BREAK BEGINS	MARCH 28 - APRIL 1
EARLY DISMISSAL	APRIL 10	PSSA TESTING BEGINS GRADES 3-8	APRIL 23 - MAY 10
EARLY DISMISSAL	MAY 8	PROM	MAY 11
MEMORIAL DAY NO SCHOOL	MAY 27	LAST DAY OF SCHOOL & GRADUATION	MAY 29

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