



Woodstock Community Unit School District 200

For Immediate Release

April 23 , 2026

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WNHS students mentor elementary students through Big Brothers Big Sisters program

While many high schoolers are still waking up, about 10 dedicated Woodstock North High School students are already busy, serving as mentors for their younger peers.

This past year marked the successful debut of a new partnership between Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of McHenry County and Woodstock Community Unit School District 200, pairing high school "Bigs" with elementary "Littles" at Mary Endres Elementary School.

Kevin Lyons, Communications Director for District 200, also serves on the Board of Directors for Big Brothers Big Sisters of McHenry County.

While he helped launch a lunchtime mentoring program for adults and elementary and middle school students, he hoped the District could accommodate a high school mentoring program. The challenge was a large time gap between when elementary students are dismissed and when the final high school bell rings. All of the other high school-based programs in McHenry County meet after school.

“Fortunately, D200 is full of creative, solution-oriented people. After meeting with our social workers, they suggested a morning program, and the BBBS staff members were willing to pivot,” Lyons said.

Lyons credited BBBS staff, Mary Endres social worker, Amanda Zuidema, and Kristy Hinz, a Woodstock North social worker and the adviser for the Thunder Interact Service Club, with the program's early success.

The Thunder program has quickly distinguished itself as one of the largest school-based mentorship initiatives in the region.

New Morning Routine

"This innovative format worked out wonderfully," says Nicole Laster, Site-Based Program Manager for BBBS of McHenry County. "We heard feedback from Mary Endres staff that on days when Littles met with their Bigs at the beginning of school, they were set up for success for the remainder of the day."

The morning schedule also solved a common hurdle for high school volunteers: scheduling. By meeting before school, students were able to participate in the program without it conflicting with after-school sports, jobs, or other extracurricular commitments.

The Power of the "Thunder"

The program's rapid growth is largely credited to Hinz, who noted that the partnership drew in a record number of mentors, including students who had never participated in service work before.

"I have so much gratitude for all of the students who consistently show up," Hinz said. "This turned into almost all of our Bigs being some of the volunteer standouts within our club, completing many service hours and making a great impact on our community."

Hinz observed that the mentors are gaining as much as they give. During club meetings, the "Bigs" often share stories that highlight the development of real-world leadership skills, including conflict management, emotional co-regulation, and trust-building.

Building Bridges

From early December through the end of April, the program served eleven Mary Endres children. For students like Audrey Laski, a sophomore Big at Woodstock North, the experience was a highlight of her year.

"In my experience as a Big... I have never had so much fun and have learned so much by being a mentor to my Little," Laski said.

The success of the program relied on a close collaboration between BBBS and District 200 staff. Laster credits the "incredible" efforts of staff members, including Zuidema, Courtney Deering, and Yvonne Morrongiello, for facilitating the partnership and referring students who could benefit most from the mentorship.

Zuidema said the Thunder student visits provide her students with something meaningful to look forward to. "These interactions help keep students motivated, strengthen their relationships with peers and teachers, and build a greater sense of excitement about coming to school," she said.

She said that while all the students enjoy the program, one student has undergone a dramatic transformation this school year, which she credits at least partially to the BBBS program.

"He has become more social, his overall attitude is much more positive, and he is expressing his feelings more productively. He looks forward to meeting with his 'big,' and you can see his excitement grow as soon as he realizes it is Big Brothers Big Sisters day," Zuidema said.

Looking Ahead

With the inaugural year concluding, organizers are already looking toward the 2026-2027 school year. The goal is to launch earlier in the fall to allow the pairs more time to bond. Because many of the current Bigs are juniors, they will have the opportunity to continue their specific mentorships as seniors, providing a rare level of consistency for the Littles.

There are currently discussions underway to form a similar program between Woodstock High School and Dean Street Elementary School.

The program has proven that a simple shift in timing can lead to a massive impact, turning a routine morning into a foundation for student success.