Developing a strong set of social skills is important for students of all ages. Sharing, communicating, problem solving, interacting with authority figures and cooperating with peers are just a few primary skills that are learned early in life. Such skills help students navigate through both school and childhood, and eventually lead to what it takes to succeed in adulthood.

“Social skills are absolutely crucial,” said Northview High School principal Stephanie Valleroy. “Employers today are looking for people that can have a conversation and conduct themselves with basic social skills. And that’s not just those that employ workers with disabilities, it’s all employers.”

At Hazelwood West High School, students of all abilities meet together regularly. They team up to form the Peer Buddies club, where students receiving SSD services join with other students to cheer together at school sporting events. They get together before games to socialize, eat pizza and make posters that support their team. During the game, they sit together in the stands to make up a special cheering section among the fans. Although they might not realize it, members of Peer Buddies are forming valuable social skills through their interactions.

“It gives our SSD students more confidence in themselves,” said club sponsor and SSD speech/language pathologist Jodi Schutzenhofer. “It helps with self esteem. I think that it’s real-life practice and it’s a safe place because they’re with friends.”

But it’s not just SSD students that benefit from being in Peer Buddies. “Everyone is there to have fun and make friends,” Schutzenhofer said. “It shows all students that diversity comes in many ways.”

SSD students throughout St. Louis County have no shortage of programs designed to grow these valuable social skills.

“At Northview, we have the Northview Girls Group that is made up of students across all abilities,” Valleroy said. “They concentrate on making friendships and dealing with controversy.”

Students that are in the Bridges program at Northview also have the opportunity to join the After School Program where they are given the chance to stay after school to work together on team sports, cooking, crafts or just for fun.

“It’s actually a privilege for these students to stay after school,” Valleroy said.

At Neuwoehner High School, many students participate in Boot Camp — a student-led group that combines physical activities with social skills like helping others, self-monitoring, leadership, partnerships and mentoring.

Physical therapist Laurie Dahle, who has seen the positive impact of the Boot Camp group, recounted the experiences of one of her students at Neuwoehner.

“Just the idea that these mentor students were talking to my student and included him and showed him how to do things was a big deal,” Dahle said. “He was very self-conscious at first. But the leaders kept encouraging him and he got more comfortable and more verbal. Now he’s doing things as a student that wouldn’t have happened two or three years ago. Now he’s the one speaking up and interacting with other students.”

For more resources on social skills, visit www.ssdmo.org/step3/social_skills.html.

When Social Skills Make a Difference

“It’s just fun to spend time with my friends there.” – Barbara Behlmann on joining Peer Buddies at Hazelwood West High School

“He was very self-conscious at first. But the leaders kept encouraging him and he got more comfortable and more verbal.” – Laurie Dahle on Boot Camp at Neuwoehner High School.

“It shows all students that diversity comes in many ways.” – Jodi Schutzenhofer on Peer Buddies club at Hazelwood West High School.
One year ago, Bryan Broome was starting at a new school. He had completed his junior year at Eureka High School and was a first-year senior at South Technical High School.

“Bryan was on a different academic path before his senior year,” said his father Tony. “When he finished his junior year, Bryan brought up the idea of attending South Tech to attend the Automotive Technology program.”

The Automotive Technology program was full at the time, but Bryan found a spot in the Motorcycle and Small Engine Technology program instead. It turned out to be a good fit for him.

After just one year in the program Bryan went on to earn gold medals at both the state and national SkillsUSA competitions for Motorcycle Services Technology. An impressive feat for anyone, much less a one-year student.

“He was just like a sponge the way he learned things in class,” said Randy Prewitt, who teaches the Motorcycle and Small Engine Technology program at South Tech. “He’s a one-of-a-kind student.”

The two-day national competition included two written tests, an interview, and a hands-on portion where contestants had to put together an engine in two hours. Bryan assembled his in just one hour and four minutes.

Bryan now attends Ranken Technical College on a scholarship he earned due in large part to his success on the national stage. He also came home with a large collection of prizes for his gold medal, including Snap-On tools, $750 worth of Carhart clothing, Irwin Tools and numerous other scholarship offers.

But one prize literally outweighs them all — A new Harley-Davidson donated to South Tech’s motorcycle program for future students to use as a learning tool.

“We’ll be able to use it for component location,” Prewitt said. “And it will be the only bike we have that is fuel injection, so the students will be able to learn something they wouldn’t otherwise be able to learn here.”

“SkillsUSA contests are highly competitive,” said SkillsUSA Advisor and Instructional Facilitator Rosina Palmer. “The state competition has about 2,200 competing.

Continued on back cover
Impact of SSD Services:
ONE FAMILY’S STORY

Laurie Wagner and her family are eternally grateful to the SSD staff that work with her son Jack, who was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3.

“For our son, SSD services have made all the difference,” she said. “Before his classification, we had no direction, and no name for this ‘thing’ we, as a family, were struggling with.”

Jack, who attends Ross Elementary School in the Parkway School District, has received social and speech services, occupational therapy, adaptive physical education instruction and other forms of support.

As instances of autism continue to increase across the United States, SSD has emerged as a leader in meeting the unique and complex needs of this growing student population.

Over the last six years, the number of students with autism that SSD serves has nearly doubled, and the cost to provide those services has risen 43 percent.

While the causes of autism may be unclear, the interventions and therapies for those with autism continue to improve. For many people living with the disorder, these new therapies and interventions are helping them live productive, meaningful lives.

“With the SSD services he has received, our son now has the opportunity to lead a far more normal life,” Laurie Wagner said. “His teachers and SSD staff have contributed in a significant way to his potential. We say a word of thanks to them daily as we watch him grow and evolve into the wonderful, kind, fun kid he is.”

On Nov. 6, SSD will ask voters to further their investment in the district and its students. For 55 years, SSD has been making a difference in the lives of students and Proposition S aims to ensure that the tradition continues.

Budget projections show that revenue is expected to continue to decline. And we also know that the needs and the challenges of our students are greater than ever before.

Proposition S is a proposed tax levy increase that will allow the district to continue to provide quality educational services while remaining financially stable.

PROPOSITION S FACTS

- The proposed increase is 19 cents, which would raise the district’s tax levy from $1.00 per $100 assessed valuation to $1.19 per $100 assessed valuation.

- Our students, parents, staff and the community have identified the following areas as important for the success of our students. As such, we want to preserve these areas as funding priorities for the district:
  - Maintain services for the rapidly growing number of students with autism;
  - Sustain programs for students that provide opportunities for job training experience for post-school employment;
  - Provide updated technology so that students are well prepared for today’s and tomorrow’s workforce;
  - Provide competitive salaries to high quality teachers and other staff in order to meet the unique needs of our students; and
  - Repair and renovate SSD schools to provide a safe environment that is better-suited for student needs.

- A levy of $1.19 per $100 of assessed valuation is projected to adequately fund the district for at least six years.

- The increase in taxes on a $100,000 house would be $36.10 annually, or 69 cents per week.

And only the gold medal winners advance to the national competition. So it’s really just the top competitors there.”

“It was an extremely exciting contest,” Tony Broome said. “Mr. Prewitt and Mrs. Palmer were the driving forces behind all of this. They were really encouraging throughout the competitions.”

And it’s a good thing they were.

“I wasn’t going to go. I knew I could compete, but at first I just didn’t want to go,” Bryan said. “I guess it’s a good thing I went. It was worth it.”

Nathan Comerio, also from South Tech, earned a silver medal in the Welding Art Sculpture contest. Along with his medal, he was awarded a new welder along with other prizes. Nathan is a senior this year and plans to attend Tulsa Welding School after graduation.