



Students at Coon Rapids High School typically show empathy through acts of kindness for others. In distance learning, they're discovering how to be kind to themselves.

Acknowledging the challenges of distance learning has led a group of teenagers concerned about their well-being to approach the school's staff.

By Sarah Fox

When Stefanie Nelson, a High School Youth Services Coordinator has a bad day, she puts her best foot forward. She strides into work with purpose, and unexpectedly, a student will ask, "Mrs. Nelson, are you alright? You don't seem your normal self."

Stefanie is amazed. Teenagers are showing an interest in her well-being. They're exemplifying the merits of empathy she's devoted her work to instilling in them. They're showing her they care.

Prior to COVID-19, Coon Rapids High School students in Stefanie's service club, the Leos, had been tasked with identifying areas they want to see change in their school and in their community. To get started, Stefanie and the Leos turned to WE.

The students set the structure for their service work by using resources from WE Well-being, a program that empowers students and educators to promote their well-being and that of their community. With this program, they transform their ideas into project plans, project plans into community action.

The Leos launched the Kindness Matters Campaign, now in its third year. The club created kindness messages on magnets and buttons, started a reading club at the elementary school and led a school-wide service day.

This year, kindness looks a little different for the Leos. They are continuing their focus on the school, sending postcards to the whole student body, including the staff. Elementary school students receive reading support via video logs. Messages of encouragement and thanks are sent to senior homes and hospital workers in the community.

They're also turning their attention inward.

"This year's focus is more on that mental health, well-being piece," Stefanie says. The school offers COVID resources, including a virtual "chill space" with videos on calming your body, how to reduce stress and lower anxiety, and how to connect with somebody at a distance.

But still, students are struggling with the adjustment to distance learning. They've recognized that the typical teaching approach is not working through the screen. "They're asking for patience," Stefanie says. "The ability to slow down and understand what's happening. Some people have got some major stuff going on at home, and school is maybe not the top priority."

Students took their concerns to the Coon Rapids High School staff meeting. They discussed issues around flexibility with assignments and re-evaluating expectations. Most importantly, students expressed their need to feel supported by their teachers. Simple things like saying, "I'm here for you," noticing when students are missing from class and checking in on them regularly makes a world of difference for students struggling to adjust, cope and keep up. The students are now preparing to present this to their classes to get other kids on board.

"Working with these high school kids, the share of empathy is really important," Stefanie says. "It makes a big difference when you acknowledge somebody. Maybe they've not been acknowledged all day."

As students encourage their teachers to practice empathy, Stefanie continues to support them. For her, building mutual trust can be as simple as saying this common Leos club mantra to the people around you every day: I hear you; I see you; I acknowledge you.

