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By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader

Liberal High School students will be given the opportunity next year to enhance the lives of local fifth graders. Not only will they experience the joy of building a new friendship, the time put into the new Big Brothers Big Sisters program will earn them community service hours which are mandatory for graduation.

“We have a new program starting in the fall, it’s called Bigs in Schools,” Big Brothers Big Sisters Community Director Kerry Seibel said. “We will be pairing up our sophomores, juniors and seniors at the high school with fifth graders at both Cottonwood and Sunflower Intermediate schools. They will be spending an hour once a week at one of the intermediate schools with a little that they are paired up with.”

Seibel is proud to announce that the response from the local teenagers has been much better than expected. However, she said, still more are needed.

“Right now we have had way better response than we thought we would have,” she said. “Of course, we always have a higher demand for littles. We actually have way more on our waiting list than we do people who want to help. We always need bigs in the community.”

The new program that will be implemented this fall consists of bigs going to the school of the littles and spending an hour a week with them there on their own turf. The activities the bigs and littles can participate in range anywhere from doing homework to sports.

“It will be one hour a week, they can help them with homework, we have a list of activities that they can do with them,” Seibel said.

"They can play basketball, do any kind of sports. It will be on site so they won't be going out in the community or anything, they will be at one of the intermediate schools. It would be after school and they will just become friends."

According to Seibel, statistics show that students involved in such programs actually see an improvement in their grades as well as self-esteem. Ultimately, she said, the goal is to prevent these children from using alcohol or tobacco at a young age.

"The statistics show that kids that have improved grades, attitude and self-confidence do better in school," she said. "We got our funding from the Liberal Area Coalition for Families which is prevention for underage drinking and tobacco use.

"It has always been proven that kids that do good in school and always have self-confidence are less likely to use alcohol and tobacco," she explained. "That is why we are pairing up with them and are very excited about the program."

Seibel intends to have an orientation this summer for those interested in mentoring to attend. However, attendance is not mandatory for involvement in the program.

"We hope to have an orientation this summer to just kind of give them ideas of what is expected of them," she said. "We try to pair them up with someone who is good at one of the things they might be lacking in, and they will just spend time together.

"I am sure that they will be learning as they go," she continued.

"They will be given a packet beforehand that kind of describes things that they might need to know such as good touch, bad touch and personal hygiene."

Seibel said that there are already kids that are being suggested as bigs for the program. Teachers and counselors at LHS have already designated certain students for the program.

"These are kids that have been pre-screened through the high school that they are going to be good mentors," she said. "These are kids that already have the mind frame that they are going to be role models."

Following the implementation of the program, the progress of the littles will be documented in order to determine the success of the program.

"We will track their performance through the school," Seibel said.

"Everything, of course, will be confidential. Their grades and their performances will be tracked that way we will know.

"Our grant is good for three years," she added. "This is new to us.

There are 24 sites throughout Kansas that have been operating, for some of them 10 years, doing this and they all do it differently. We do have a lot of support from Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters on how this is supposed to work."

Seibel added that high school students involved in the Bigs in Schools program will receive community service hours that are a requirement for graduation.

"The volunteers will be receiving their community service hours through this," she explained. "It is a requirement for all students for graduation. Before it was just for the academic looking to receive valedictorian or something, but now all students are required a certain amount of hours. That is another big plus, they will be receiving their public service hours for graduation."

Seibel encourages any interested student who will be starting their sophomore, junior or senior year this fall to contact her at 624-9000 or Vivian Dirks at the high school counselor's office.

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