



University of Iowa students visit classes to spread Hawkeye cheer

By Sara Faiwell | Daily Herald Staff

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Some University of Iowa students came to the suburbs last week to spread around a little Hawkeye cheer.

Classes in Palatine Elementary District 15 were visited by members of the college's volunteer group STAR, which stands for Students to Assist Recruitment.

Along with having college mascot Herky the Hawk show up in costume, local students got tons of Hawkeye gifts and played Iowa-related games in the classroom.

Members of the STAR group have been writing two letters per month to the fourth- and fifth-graders. In return, the elementary school students write about themselves.

Rachel Leffring, a 22-year-old college senior from Orland Park, says it's fun to see what the kids send over.

"It's always interesting," she said. "People have gotten everything from part of a cast when someone was hurt to origami."

She and another student, 21-year-old Kevin Farrell, from Hoffman Estates, decided that instead of just writing, they should pay a visit to the elementary students over their winter break.

The partnership began by Whiteley Elementary School teacher Cindy Zeivel. She wanted to connect the Iowa students with her 22 fifth-graders as part of their "No Excuses University" program, a national initiative to encourage kids to attend college.

Through the letters and visits by the University of Iowa, it accomplishes the program's mission: to give information, access and opportunities for higher education from an early age.

Iowa alumna Meghan Walker, a fourth-grade teacher at Virginia Lake Elementary School also wrote to ask that her 23 students be "adopted" by STAR as pen pals.

Leading up to the visit, the college students received pictures of classrooms decorated in a Hawkeye theme and bulletin boards full of information about the college.

In the Whiteley class, every Friday is spirit day and all the kids wear black and gold. Each morning, they look at an online camera at the Iowa City campus and say "Good morning Hawkeyes!"

The fifth-graders were betting other classes with pen pals from other Big Ten universities during football season, according to the teachers.

The losers had to wash lunch tables or the desks in the classrooms. The kids were also learning the Iowa Fight Song so they could sing it every time Iowa won a game.

After the in-class visit, Leffring said she was so impressed by the student spirit.

"It was so cool to see such young kids be so excited about a college," she said. "I wasn't even thinking about college when I was that age."