

# Volunteer helps SK CARES continue to support students

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Staff Writer

Through the help of a dedicated volunteer, the group South Kingstown Connecting All Resources for Educational Support – better known as SK CARES – will provide take-home science experiments for all first-grade students in the district starting next week.

Kerry O'Rourke, 25, has been volunteering with the non-profit for a year and is helping continue its years-long tradition of connecting the community and its schools to foster better education.

The community-school relationship SK CARES offers has become essential, said Helen Pernicone, president of the organization's board of directors and a retired elementary school teacher. She said in the face of a tight budget and fewer assistants, teachers continue to find themselves in need of a helping hand, and SK CARES volunteers have helped fill the gap.

Recently, O'Rourke – alongside her former teacher at Wakefield Elementary School, Bridget Gonsalves – was instrumental in creating a new initiative that will bring "science sacks" to all first-graders. The organization received a \$15,000 grant from Cox Charities, making it possible to grow the homework and mentoring clubs with a focus on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and math). The new initiative includes 13 backpacks filled with worksheets, an experiment based on growing peas and a book

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for students to continue their science education at home with their parents.

The concept is that one student takes home the bag for one or two nights and works on the experiment alongside a parent or guardian, and then returns the bag for the next student to take home and complete. The sacks will help students learn at the same pace, Pernicone said. Bringing lessons home can reinforce the classroom lesson or give an extra help to a student who needed more time with the project.

"I love being back here," O'Rourke said about her volunteer hours at Wakefield Elementary School. "It brings good things to me. And I love kids; they're really fun." She said she gets joy out of seeing the students running outside and playing and the time she spends at school helping others every Tuesday for several hours.

O'Rourke took home all the materials and spent hours filling folders, assembling hundreds of peas into baggies and neatly organizing each sack.

The organization has evolved into four programs – mentoring, weekly homework club, career and college guidance for high schoolers and

classroom volunteers. The latter is the largest program, and teachers request volunteers for an array of purposes.

"This is a representation that we really hope former students volunteer like Kerry," said Gonsalves, who has taught at Wakefield Elementary School for 24 years.

"We really hope to expand this initiative once we get them going in first grade and if we get the grant again, we hope to grow it to the other grades. The home school piece is really important to us; tying parents in more is nice so they can have that connection," she added.

Things have come full circle for O'Rourke. She said she has fond memories of sitting in Gonsalves' classroom, and now she is in that same classroom helping create memories with young children.

"The original group that put SK CARES together, for them to see that vision come alive every day is so inspiring ... to be able to give back to your community and see how it impacts students and how it impacts the adults," Pernicone said.

She added, "Some people wonder, 'What do I have to offer as a volunteer?' You have yourself. That's all you need to help support a child – be their friend, listen to them."

In the 2015-16 school year, SK CARES placed 373 volunteers and marked a total of 9,218 volunteer hours. It continues to provide assistance through the help of University of Rhode Island student volunteers and community members.



PHOTO: MICHAEL DERR

SK CARES volunteer Kerry O'Rourke is pictured with the "science sacks" she helped organize for first-graders at Wakefield Elementary School.