



MIDDLE SCHOOLERS TURNED MICRO-BANKERS

PATCH.COM
FEBRUARY 11, 2011

A sixth-grade class in Minnetonka is in their third year of donating to micro-entrepreneurs in the developing world.

A group of kids at Minnetonka Middle School East (MME) has made their 100th micro-loan, to a micro-entrepreneur in a developing country.

"It's actually really cool," said sixth grader, Jack, 12. "It's so great."

As part of their SAIL (Students Actively Involved in Learning) class, the sixth graders, with the help of teacher Mary Fenwick, loaned \$100 to a farmer in Kenya.

"He looks like a good guy. We know the money is going to a good cause," Jack said.

Classmate Miri, 12, agreed. "It felt like an achievement. We know we are loaning money to people who really need it. It feels good."

According to his loan request, Paul, a Kenyan dairy farmer, will use the money to buy a new cow—increasing his productivity.

This is the third year that MME students, through an organization called Kiva, have provided small business micro-loans to help the working poor in developing countries. Their hope is that these micro-loans will empower individuals in those countries to lift themselves out of poverty.

"We know we are saving people's lives and I suppose changing them forever," said Adrienne, 11.

Since MME started the program, students have loaned more than \$4000 to 100 micro-entrepreneurs all over the world, including one person in New York City.

"It's been an amazing teachable moment," said MME Principal Pete Dymit. "Kids are innately generous, our community is so generous...it's an opportunity to donate on a global level."

The original start-up dollars—about \$1200 in the first year, came from student fundraising and MME family donations, but the available funds have grown as businesses have repaid the loans with interest.

When it's time to lend the funds to the businesses, the children, along with Fenwick, search profiles of micro-entrepreneurs on the Kiva website. On this day, the kids first noticed Moses, also from Kenya.

"Let's go back to Kenya today, for our 100th loan," Fenwick told the students. "Since that's where we made our first loan."

But in spending the time to research Moses—including his business idea, his star rating, or what we would term his credit rating, and how much he's already raised towards his goal, Moses was scooped up by another benefactor. The 20 students made a collective groan but they persevered in their search and eventually landed on Paul.

"He'll use it wisely!" Jack exclaimed.

According to Fenwick, the students have gotten more sophisticated in the ways they pick the entrepreneur they want to help: "Sometimes they chose them because they liked their name..."

"Oh yeah! Remember Mama Cobra?" Jack energetically interrupted.

Everyone laughed, thinking about the Senegalese woman with the fun name, to whom they had previously lent money.

"...But now we look at who this person really is," Fenwick continued. "I'm hoping they will be other-centered and like the feeling of helping someone without anything in return."



So with the click of the mouse, thanks to 11-year-old Sydney, \$100 is sent the roughly 8,000 miles from Minnetonka to Kenya.

"We're really helping someone to make their life better," Alex, 12, said.

The class erupts in applause and cheers. Jack even makes a speech to the class. Then everyone retreats to the back of the room to share cookies, cupcakes and Coke.

"It is amazing how the students learn basic business and economic concepts, while making a huge difference in the lives of others around the world," said Janet Swiecichowski, Minnetonka schools spokesperson.

Through Kiva, almost half a million people have loaned more than \$150 million to 408,000 entrepreneurs in 53 countries. The organization lists a 1 percent default rate and a 97 percent on time repayment rate and according to Principal Dymit, that's about right—he said only two of the 100 loans they have made, have not been repaid.

Fenwick said many of the students are taking these concepts back to their families, who then contribute through Kiva, themselves. "Everyone is starting to look beyond our own area...to look at people globally," Fenwick said.

"This really helps us know what's going on in the world," Adrienne said. "And if we don't know what's going on in the world, how can we help anybody?"