

# Avoca West launches first elementary school Best Buddies chapter in state



*Students at Avoca West Elementary School play games at the school's first Best Buddies event Dec. 15. The school is the first elementary school in Illinois to have a chapter of Best Buddies, an organization that advocates for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. PHOTO SUBMITTED*

The Avoca West School community is thrilled to collaborate with Best Buddies to launch the first and only elementary school chapter in Illinois.

Best Buddies is an international nonprofit organization that advocates for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities through school friendship, job integration and leadership development. Best Buddies is built upon a simple message of inclusion.

With an increasing need to educate children on the value of humanity in all forms and impress upon them the importance of relationships, it was a natural fit to couple elementary-aged children with Best Buddies. The elementary program focuses on building awareness of the program and bringing students together through student-led fundraising events, club meetings and other engaging activities.

So far, Avoca has 25 student participants, who have met on various occasions to work toward the first community event, which was held on Dec. 15.

“The scope of the event was first limited to club participants and their families, but grew to include the entire school,” said Caroline Henson, an Avoca staff coordinator. “We really wanted to reach as many people as possible.”

Families were invited to enjoy a potluck meal, games and crafts, and decorate the school halls to spread holiday cheer and to help raise funds for Best Buddies through a bake sale. The event was attended by about 50 people, who gained a new perspective on acceptance and friendship.

“You get to start new friendships with other people — people you wouldn’t normally get to be friends with,” said student Romy Parekh.