Teachers at Hillcrest Elementary School in the Crestwood School District noticed that their students in the special education courses struggled to build relationships at school and were an easy target for bullying. Concerned for the well-being of all students at the school, Special Education teachers Kristen Hawrot, Linda Pratt and Kim Raby began the Power of Peers (POP Crew) program.

The program, now in its fourth year, was created to improve relationships and integrate students by providing buddies for special education students. Responsible third and fourth grade students were selected as buddies and received intensive training from the school’s special education staff. The buddies eat lunch together, play at recess, and promote positive social habits throughout the school’s culture.

The POP Crew was an instant hit within the district. The special education students are learning how to create meaningful friendships and the general education students are more accepting of differences and are connecting with others outside their comfort zone.

“We plan to continue to eliminate any stigma toward our special education students. The students involved in this program are incredible and have helped us create a culture of acceptance in Hillcrest Elementary. Students are also gaining confidence to create lifelong meaningful friendships with their peers.”

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER LINDA PRATT

To continue the mission of this program, the POP Crew will use their grant to fund events and materials for their group. Specifically, the POP Crew wants to purchase t-shirts, host field trips, advertise their mission, and update their games and equipment. They also hope to add a “buddy-bench” to their playground – a place where any student can sit during recess if they are feeling down or need a friend. The hope is that students are aware when someone is sitting on the bench and will go out of their way to ensure they feel valued and accepted. The bench will also serve as a symbol of the meaningful work from students and staff at Crestwood.