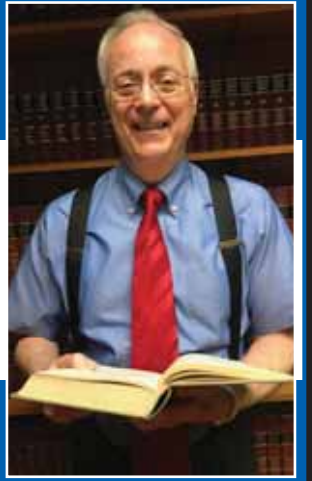


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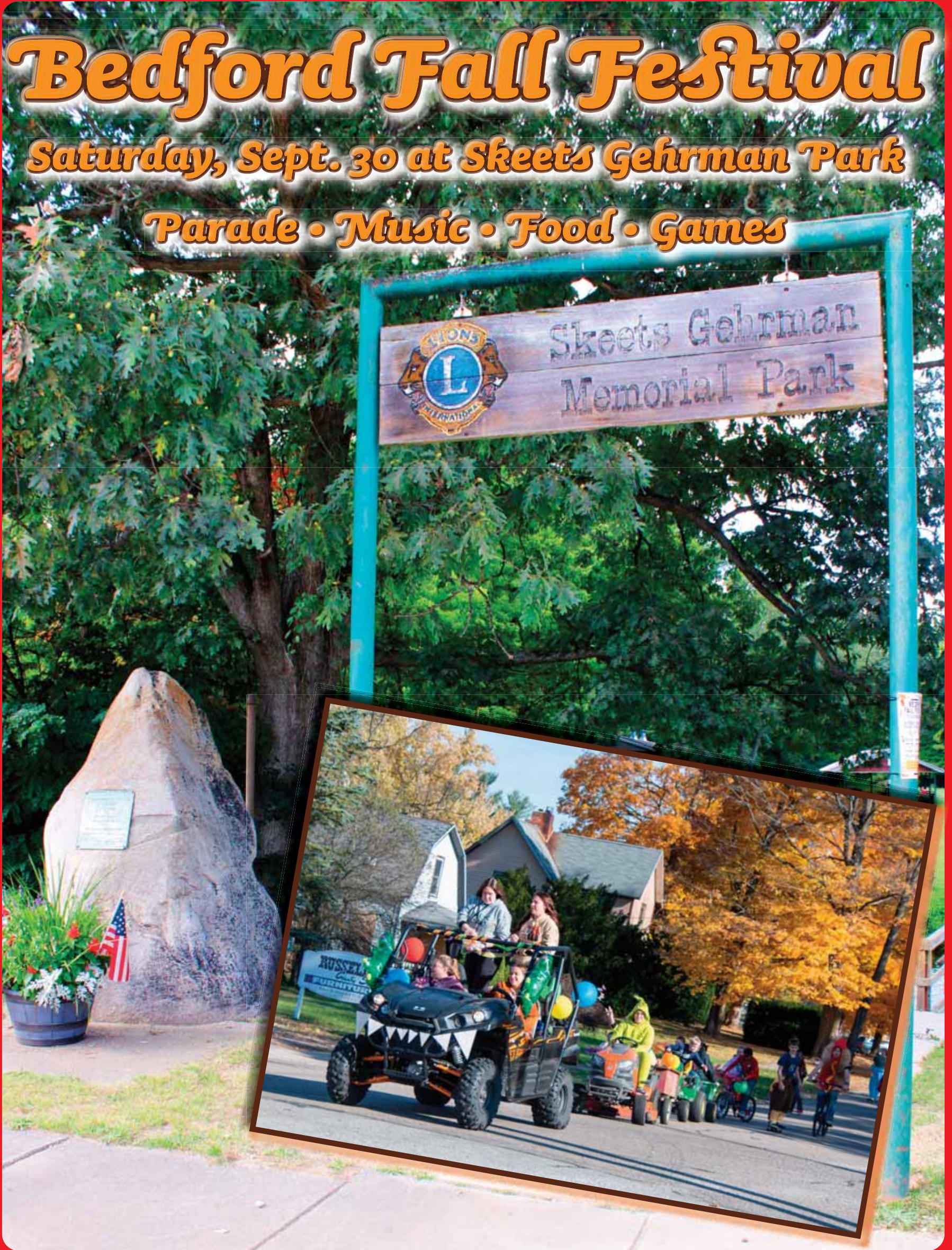
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# 'Reading Buddies' gets financial boost from State Farm

**Shelly Kehrle-Sulser**  
Executive Editor

A whopping \$35,000 was handed over Thursday in Battle Creek by State Farm Insurance to Communities in Schools Michigan to support literacy programs across the state.

Of that amount, \$6,000 will support the Communities in Schools (CIS) Reading Buddies Program that operates via volunteer readers in the Battle Creek Public Schools.

Last year, Reading Buddies worked with nearly 50 youths during the 2022-2023 school year.

"And then, (it supports) literacy days in different cities and the Dearborn Spelling Bee," said Julie Cawvey, chief advancement officer for Communities in Schools about the donation. "It's for the whole state but around \$6,000 of it will go directly to the books here in Battle Creek."

The funds will not only supply books to the participating students but to the schools.

"It's going to be story books, some of it may be fact based books," she said, "but we're really into having books that reflect our students and our communities."

Reading Buddies is a program where local volunteers work one-on-one with students.



Among the Reading Buddies volunteers recognized Thursday was Kathleen Slossen, shown here with one of her former LaMora Park Elementary School students, now attending Ann J. Kellogg, Leah Massenburg. (Shopper News photo by Shelly Kehrle-Sulser)

"We are currently supporting five schools here in Battle Creek and it's been a historic program," she said. "To my knowledge, it goes back to 2015 so it's been a longstanding program here in Battle Creek."

The majority of the volunteer recruitment is handled by Communities in Schools in partnership with Battle Creek Public Schools via the weblink, [battlecreekpublicschools.org/new/volunteer-as-a-reading-buddy](http://battlecreekpublicschools.org/new/volunteer-as-a-reading-buddy).

"Our student support coordinators help with identifying the students, case manage, provide one-on-one support

for those students," said Cawvey, "we check in with them, help those students establish goals."

For instance, in Battle Creek, of the 50 students participating last year, 78-percent either made progress or met their reading goals.

"That is through those one-on-one relationships," said Cawvey. "What I love about Reading Buddies is it's not about just the academic support but those volunteers become like a mentor. Those healthy relationships make such a difference in them wanting to come to school and wanting to engage in reading."

One Reading Buddy volunteer is Battle Creek Public Schools marketing and communications manager, Nathan Hunt.

"I love it," he said. "Honestly, the immediate impact is you develop this immediate relationship with a kid. It's a supervised, one-on-one with CIS in the room. Just sitting down and listening to them and sometimes, you don't get into the reading but as they develop that comfortable relationship with you, they get more and more into the reading."

Some days, the students don't want to read during



Communities in Schools (CIS) Michigan CEO Mallory DePrekel, center, accepts a \$35,000 donation from State Farm Insurance Thursday at Ann J. Kellogg Elementary School in Battle Creek. The money benefits CIS literacy programs across the state. Joining local State Farm agents and CIS staff at the presentation was BCPS Superintendent Kimberly Carter, fourth from right. (Shopper News photo by Shelly Kehrle-Sulser)



Some of the students who participate in the Reading Buddies program are shown here with local State Farm agents who made it possible to purchase books for the program. (Shopper News photo by Shelly Kehrle-Sulser)

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their 30 minute, once-per week session.

"They're reading to you," he said.

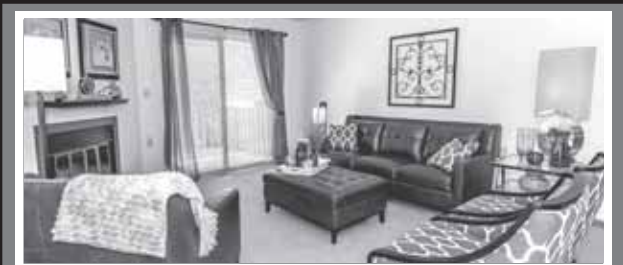
Also on hand to accept the

check from State Farm was CIS Michigan CEO Mallory DePrekel and BCPS Superintendent Kimberly

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## READING BUDDIES Continued from previous page

Carter. The check was presented during a Reading Buddies celebration at Ann J. Kellogg School where Larvenda Williams is the lead student support coordinator for CIS. “Your role as a Reading Buddy goes beyond fostering literacy skills,” said Carter during the celebration attended by Reading Buddy volunteers and students. “You’ve provided our students with something equally important: a positive, caring adult relationship.” According to Carter, those bonds are critical to a child’s overall success. “You’ve given our students a mentor, a friend, and a

source of inspiration,” she said. “Let us not forget the intangible lessons you’ve imparted – the values of empathy, patience and the joy of sharing stories.” Battle Creek State Farm Agents on hand to present the check were Chad Heeter, Kristin Wykoski, John Chmiel, Chase Anthes and District Manager Karl Smathers. “State Farm appreciates Communities in Schools for the great work that they do,” said Smathers. “In particular, we’re excited about the program here in Battle Creek where one-on-one volunteers and students work together on reading. What a wonder-

ful way to help people get started.” The check helps children all over the state, too, he said. “This grant went out to several different districts and it went through Communities in Schools,” he said. DePerkel wanted to attend the event in Battle Creek to honor the Reading Buddies and to help accept the grant. “They’ve given us money yearly but not this much,” said DePerkel. “So, in the past its been \$15,000, but this is the largest donation from them ever. It’s great news. We’re thrilled to be a part of it. They’ve been a long time partner and this is

a good celebration of that.” The funds are expected to help the 45,000 youths across the state served by CIS, she said. In all, there are about 12 volunteer Reading Buddies in the district. CIS Program Director for BCPS and Grand Rapids Public Schools Nyekah Guest said Reading Buddies are also recruited via distributed flyers, via site coordinators who speak to the public and via a QR code on the flyers and on district websites. “We go to all of the community events within the city and we have our QR codes there,” she said. “We are


always recruiting, year round.” Pre-pandemic, Guest said there were roughly 300 Reading Buddies but when the program went virtual during the pandemic, many of the volunteers left the program. “We lost quite a bit but now that we’re back in the buildings and our orientations are in person,” she said, “we’re able to get more people.” Last year, there were roughly 35 readers, she said. Reading assistance happens during the school day and Reading Buddies can help more than one student per week.

Reading Buddy Zena Perry, a CIS senior accounting manager, is also a crossing guard and occasional lunch room helper at Dudley STEM School. She has helped six or seven students with their reading skills, she said. A majority of the volunteer readers are senior citizens, said Guest. Many are retired teachers. “Retired teachers are the best asset that we have,” she said. All of the BCPS Reading Buddies were awarded certificates at the Thursday celebration.

## Wall That Heals plaque dedicated at HCHS






A permanent plaque commemorating and honoring Harper Creek High School in Battle Creek for being the host site in July 2022 of The Wall That Heals – a traveling replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. that lists more than 58,000 names of U.S. soldiers who died in the Vietnam War – was affixed to a stone column located just to the left of the entrance to the athletic fields at HCHS by the Calhoun County Red White and Blue Foundation last Friday during an afternoon ceremony. Shown in this photo representing the CCRWBF are (from left) Brig. Gen. Robert Secrist, CCRWBF founder and president Dave Morgan, and Col. Frank Walker (far right); and shown representing HCHS (third from left) is Harper Creek Community Schools Superintendent Rob Ridgeway. (Shopper News photo by Will Kowalski)



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