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Mounds View letter jackets gain a new meaning - community service

Students in the Mounds View district may soon get the chance to letter in doing good deeds.

By **NORMAN DRAPER**, Star Tribune

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Helping out at church, delivering meals to elderly people and picking up litter could soon translate into the exalted status of a letter jacket at the Mounds View district's two high schools.

The district's community education office, in conjunction with Irondale High School, in New Brighton, and Mounds View High School, in Arden Hills, has started a program that will award a "letter" to students who join a service club at school and perform 150 hours of community service. The move isn't unprecedented, but letters are most commonly awarded for athletics, as well as arts activities and academic success.

"This is something we see as an ongoing and growing part of our high schools," said Nick Temali, Mounds View schools director of community education and technology. "It's

another way of helping students be connected to their school and their community." Part of the idea is to involve students who aren't participating in the kinds of programs for which letters are awarded. Another is to recognize those students who are already volunteering in the community, but falling beneath the school recognition radar screen.

At Irondale, Marvin Sims, a dean of students and community service coordinator for the school, said he just talked to one student who is already helping out at a retirement home.

"A big smile came to his face when he found out he could win a letter for that," Sims said.

The school needs to recruit at least 20 students to start its community service club, Sims said. The club would then serve as a way to conceive community service projects, for the group and individuals, and provide the mechanism for tracking progress toward the 150-hour goal. Organizers at both schools have just started putting the wheels in motion for the project. Sims said he will be putting up posters and preparing announcements to be played over the school public address system.

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"Right now, it's in the beginning stages," Sims said. "I don't think it will be a problem getting the kids. They're already doing it. If it's a big thing, we'll do it again next year."

Unusual but not unique

Awarding a letter for community service is unusual, but far from unknown. Edina schools, for instance, have been allowing students to letter in community service since 1996. At the end of the 2008-09 school year, the district recognized 125 high school students who had logged 15,000 community service hours that year. Published reports point to similar programs at schools in Washington, Alabama, Texas and California.

In Mounds View, Temali said the idea of allowing students to letter in community service came from Cliff Jacobson, a former school board member. Jacobson, he said, has even designed a prototype of the community service letter -- the letters "CS" with an arrow through them. They would be in the colors of Irondale -- maroon and gold -- and of Mounds View -- green and white.

"It's tailor-made to fit on a letter jacket," Temali said. A modification might be required, Temali said, because the prototype looks too much like the current "cross

country" letter. Jacobson could not be reached for a comment.

Temali and Sims noted that such recognition for community service work could be a good way to spiff up a high school résumé.

"Colleges are looking more and more for a well-rounded student," Temali said. "The more a student can put on an application beyond 'this many classes,' and 'this is my GPA [grade point average]' and 'this is my class rank' [the better]. ... The whole idea of students volunteering in the community is real big with an awful lot of colleges."

Irondale junior Nick McKusick, 17, likes the idea of a letter jacket for volunteering. He is already volunteering at Presbyterian Homes of Arden Hills, taking residents for walks, talking to them and helping them get their meals. McKusick said he is thinking about joining the program. He thinks the letter jacket idea will be an added incentive that will draw more students into community service.

"Me getting a letter jacket; I'll feel proud of that, of how I accomplished that," he said. "It means you're dedicated to what you're doing, you love it, and you want to get better at it."

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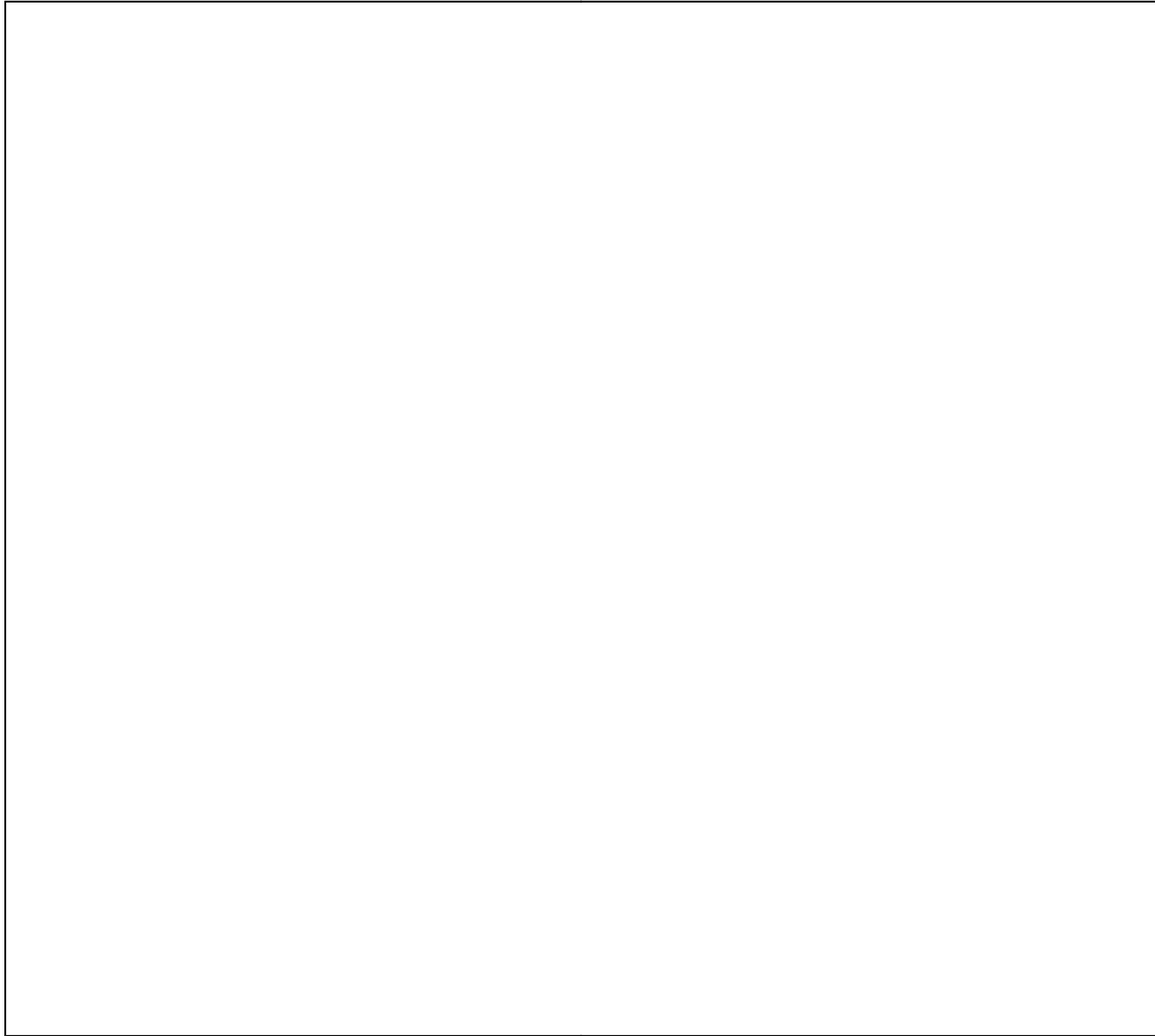
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