

Tribune photo by Jim Frisching

Earl Gunderson, 75, of Park Ridge helps a physical-education class at Field Elementary School in Park Ridge. For helping out at the school, Gunderson earns money to pay off taxes that go to the school.

With work at schools, seniors find having fun is less taxing

By Mary Ann Fergus
TRIBUNE REPORTER

With a whistle around his neck, Earl Gunderson coached a group of students as they swung floor hockey sticks in a Park Ridge elementary school gym that has become sort of a second home for the 75-year-old retiree.

"I just love the enthusiasm of these little ones," Gunderson said during a break from his duties at Field Elementary School. "You can get caught up in your own senior world."

Older adults have long volunteered in schools, but at Field and other schools in Park Ridge-Niles District 64, seniors are paid the Illinois minimum wage of \$7.50 an hour to assist teachers and pupils in the classroom.

The district is one of two in the northwest suburbs that pay seniors to tutor students, help with art projects and class decorations, greet visitors, file paperwork and do odd jobs.

The programs in District 64 and

Palatine-based Community Consolidated School District 15 aim to help seniors offset the hefty property taxes that go toward their school districts while maintaining a multi-generational work force in the schools.

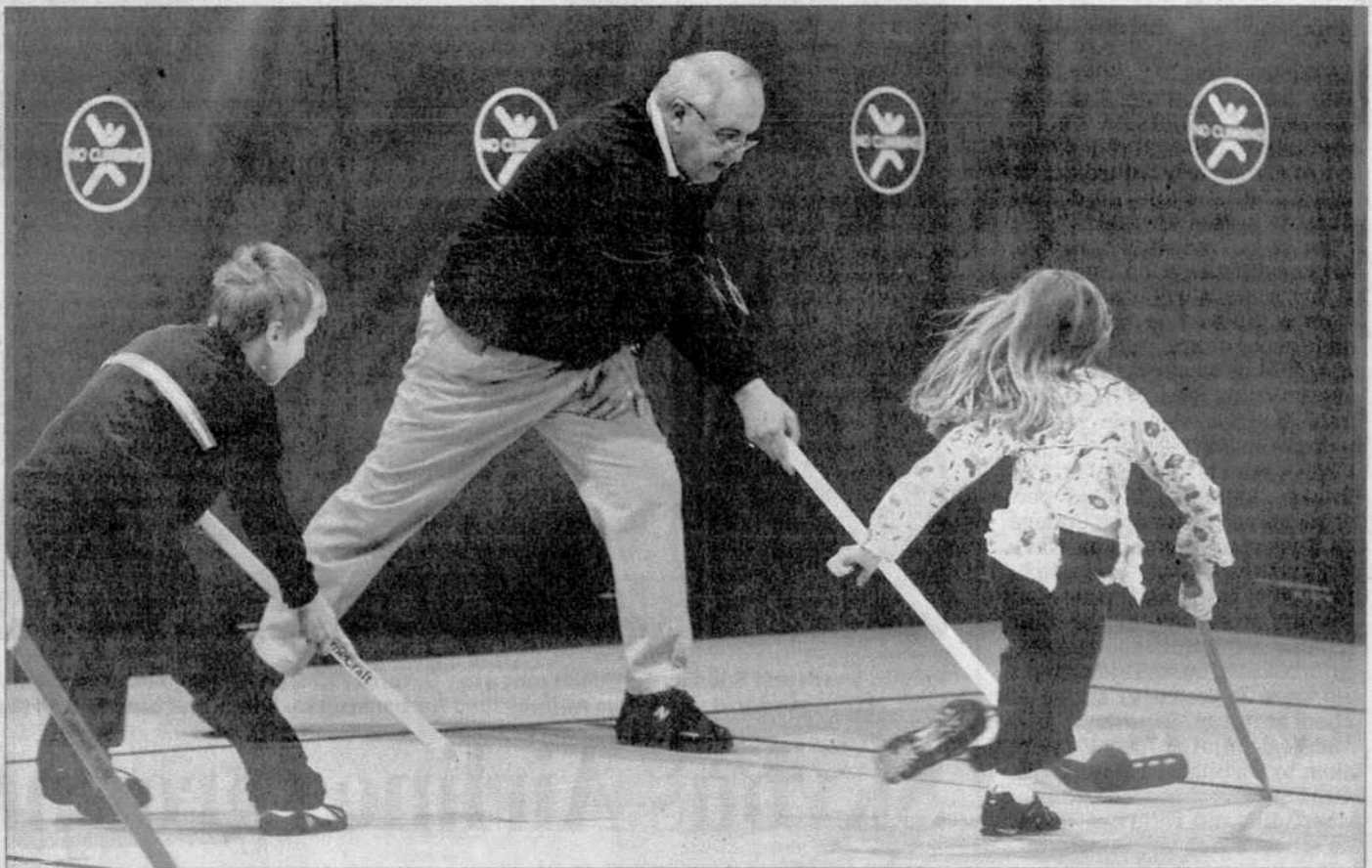
Homeowners 55 and above can earn up to the amount of the District 64 portion of their property-tax bill. That ranges from about \$680 to slightly more than \$4,600 for the approximately 55 participants in the program.

Gunderson, a former sporting goods executive and longtime baseball coach, helps out in 10 physical education classes a day on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

During the floor hockey class, he roared for students to get the ball, stopped to teach a girl how to hold the stick and exchanged high-fives as the students left for another class.

Gunderson later stepped into a session on dance where he clapped to an eight-count beat as 5th-

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Earl Gunderson, 75, of Park Ridge controls the ball during a game of floor hockey at Field Elementary School. "I just love the enthusiasm of these little ones," he says.

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grader Noah Ichen playfully rolled his neck and shoulders in and out.

These are the moments Gunderson revels in, the ones he can't wait to share later with his wife, Joyce.

He said his time at Field School might be an effort to compensate for the distance between him and his seven grandchildren, nearly all of whom live out of state. But he has found other benefits.

"I seem to sleep very well on Tuesday and Thursday evenings," he said.

Few seniors say they participate in the program only for the compensation, but most say they appreciate the money, especially after District 64's successful referendum last spring to increase the property-tax rate for two years.

The increase means the owner of a home with a market value of \$600,000 paid about \$511 more in school taxes last year to the district and will pay about \$863 more this year. Slightly more than a third of a property owner's tax bill generally goes to the elementary school district.

Palatine's Senior Exchange Program was established in 1992 and usually employs about 100 senior workers a year. The Palatine district spends about \$100,000 a year for the program, which is so popular that it wasn't even considered for the chopping block in 2005 when the district had to make \$10.5 million in cuts, said Supt. Robert McKanna.

"I like the whole intergenerational concept," McKanna said. "We should be birth-to-death, and we are."

McKanna and Supt. Sally Pryor of District 64 said they didn't know why other dis-

tricts haven't started similar programs. No one keeps track, but state and local officials said they believe the programs are rare.

Pryor suggested starting the program in Park Ridge about 11 years ago, after reading about Palatine's.

District 64 set aside \$35,000 for the program this fiscal year to pay the workers, including several newcomers who signed up following the referendum.

Advocates like that the program gives children close-up time with people such as Ross Hurt, a World War II veteran who often weaves his life experiences into a conversation or reading lesson. Hurt, 83, a retired self-employed computer consultant and part-time teacher, works two days a week at Roosevelt Elementary School in Park Ridge, usually earning the equivalent of his school taxes, or about \$3,000. He continues to

pitch in after his pay ends. "This house that I live in is 80 years old, but it's still assessed out of sight," Hurt said.

Many seniors say their duties give them something extra to push them out the door in the morning.

Janet Kapustka, 76, has worked two days a week at the Carpenter Elementary School in Park Ridge after retiring from a long nursing career. She said she felt burned out after years with sick and dying patients and prayed she'd find a new outlet, working with happy and healthy people. She found them in the classrooms.

"I'm just a lot happier," Kapustka said. "You hear all these young voices and this spirit that is so eager to learn. It's just a wonderful feeling to know you've been a part of it."

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