

Media Alert

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Rock Island-Milan School District, Connect with Kids, and Empirical Education Win Multimillion Dollar Grant to Develop Cutting Edge Curricula for Post Covid Support

The Rock Island-Milan School District #41 (RIMSD) in partnership with CWK Network, Inc. (Connect with Kids) and Empirical Education, has been awarded a \$3.8 million Education Innovation & Research (EIR) grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create a curriculum focused on improving social and emotional wellness, mental health, inclusion, and equity to address the long-term impact of COVID-19.

The title of the grant program, *How Are The Children?*, stems from a traditional greeting of African Maasai tribe warriors. Rather than ask “How are you doing?” when meeting others, their traditional greeting is “*How are the Children?*” because they understand that the true strength of a community is determined by the well-being of its children.

“We believe this is the single most important question to consider each and every day,” said Superintendent Dr. Reginald Lawrence II. “This grant is an exciting opportunity for us as our high school will be featured in national model research and on the cutting edge of a Project Based Social Emotional curriculum that involves student voices.”

In the first year of the five-year grant, Connect with Kids is designing the Project Based Learning curriculum that uses storytelling through filmmaking as a strategy for improving social and emotional wellness. Connect with Kids is also training staff on implementation and providing coaching and technology assistance. Empirical Education is conducting an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the EIR project through collection of data and analyzing the results. In the outer years of the grant, the testing will be expanded as the curriculum is distributed to school systems nationwide.

Through the oversight by Connect with Kids, Rock Island High School teachers will guide students through 25 lessons. Each lesson focuses on an SEL/equity topic corresponding to a media literacy extension. Students form “production teams,” each producing short, student-voice documentaries to tell their own electrifying stories of hope, help, despair, inspiration, second chances, last chances, and redemption, while also learning, growing, sharing, and having intimate and sometimes funny conversations with each other to make meaning of what they learn.

“We are thrilled to partner with RIMSD and Empirical Ed to create a substantive curriculum that blends student voice with a unique story-telling methodology to empower students and create positive behavior change,” said Stacey DeWitt, CEO of CWK Network, Inc. “In these transformative times, nothing could be more crucial than learning from each other’s stories and listening to the voices of our youth to answer one crucial question, *How Are the Children?*” said DeWitt.

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“We are very excited to partner with Rock Island-Milan School District and Connect with Kids on this important grant,” said Jenna Zacamy, VP of Research Operations for Empirical Education. “Over the next 5 years, our teams will develop, implement, test, and iterate a program to support the social and emotional learning (SEL) and well-being of students at Rock Island HS. Empirical Education will apply rigorous standards of evidence to conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation and impact of the *How are the Children* curriculum on student SEL competencies and behavioral outcomes. We will also conduct a formative evaluation of continued program development and scaling to additional districts. Our hope is to contribute to the national conversation about SEL supports and the local understanding of what works for Rock Island.”

By the end of the grant period, Jeff Whitaker, Principal of Rock Island High School, notes, "We will expect to see a turnaround in student attendance, decreases in behavior concerns, and an increase in academic performance. These are critical priorities for Rock Island High School staff and students."

Connect with Connect with Kids on social media [@definingusofficial](#) on Instagram, [@definingus](#) on Twitter, [Defining US](#) on LinkedIn, and [Defining US](#) on Facebook.

Connect with Empirical Education social media [@empiricaled](#) on Twitter, [Empirical Education](#) on LinkedIn, [@empiricaleducation](#) on Instagram, and [Empirical Education](#) on Facebook.

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CWK Network Inc. connects the power of media and the promise of education to advance civic responsibility, improve social and emotional wellness, and expand inclusion, belonging and opportunity for children and families. The company creates feature length documentaries and short non-fiction films with corresponding life-long learning resources and owns the nation’s largest, proprietary, non-fiction video library on these issues with over 7500 hours of raw video and thousands of short films.

The company produced the Emmy-Award winning *Connect with Kids* television documentary series distributed to over 55 million homes through CBS, ABC, NBC, and Fox television affiliates and the 2022 feature documentary *Defining US, Children at the Crossroads of Change* distributed by Gravitass Ventures and available on streaming services nationwide. CWK Network is listed as an “Effective Producer of Programs” on the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP). Connect with Kids documentaries have received over 40 media industry awards including 27 Emmy Awards and nominations.