

## Future Leader Program Recognized for Changing Students' Lives

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“You have a community behind you. You have a school behind you. And you have this kind of program behind you. Everything they do is going to bring you up rather than keep you down.” That’s what Kevin, a junior at Hill-Murray High School, said about the Future Leader Scholarship Program.

Future Leaders was recently named Program of the Year by Minndependent, the Minnesota trade association for private and independent schools. Established in 2019, the Future Leaders Program is a student program that provides students with scholarships along with the support, mentorship, and sense of community required for them to be successful in not just “doing school” but in reaching their highest potential in scholarship, leadership, and purpose. The program provides both the trampoline and the safety net that students need to learn, grow, and benefit from a private education.

Each year, 20 students are selected into the Future Leaders program in 9th grade, and they continue in the program until graduation. Funding from Rooted Philanthropic helps match tuition support from Hill-Murray and from the family. To date, one cohort of students has graduated and one more will graduate this month.

In addition to regular cohort meetings, students are expected to participate in at least two extracurricular activities, work to the best of their ability in their classes, set yearly social and academic goals, engage in Future Leader curriculum discussions, and complete a service/leadership project. The curriculum focuses on student leadership and draws from best-in-class authors, such as “Tuesdays with Morrie” by Mitch Albom or the “Student Leadership Challenge” workbook by Kouzes and Posner. The Future Leaders then put learning into action by completing group projects based on identified needs in their school or home communities. One example was the creation of an in-house food shelf of sorts where students in need could discreetly access snacks after school. Others tutor children or play music at nursing homes. Each student grows as a leader.



Future Leaders is led by longtime staff member Denise Bates, who is the heart and soul of the program. Denise meets with each grade level group on a regular basis during the school day to provide guidance, and mentorship and to deliver a leadership curriculum that challenges students to dig deep as they learn

more about themselves and how they can be of service to their school, their community, and the world both now and in the future.

Tashvi, a Future Leader, commented, "I look up to Mrs. Bates, she doesn't just tell us about good leadership, she shows us."

Eric, a senior Future Leader agreed, "She always lifts everybody's spirits. She's there for everybody. Life's tough and she knows that. It's great to see someone who gets it and is patient and understanding."

And the program is having a big impact both on the students and the school.

"There are kids in this program that come from all different backgrounds. Have all different lived experiences. Have all different day-to-day lives. What's been really neat about this program is kids learn from other kids who have different experiences than they do. We hoped that this was going to happen but there's a trust that needs to be there in order for kids to share authentically who they are and what their lives are like," said Denise. "A big piece from the school's perspective is to create the physical space where kids feel comfortable and safe to be themselves and have a place for rest, a place for connection, have a place for community so those next level things can happen. It's such a diverse group of students that they have the opportunity to be in a room with kids that maybe wouldn't be your typical friend group. Kids are sitting next to somebody with whom they may never have rubbed elbows in another scenario. That is so valuable. It reflects real life and prepares them to be in the real world."

Denise concludes: "Real learning doesn't happen without kids feeling like somebody here cares about me and that there's a place where I can go to be myself."





The Future Leader Program enriches not just the experience of the students in the program but provides the entire Hill-Murray community with a richness that goes beyond a single understanding of what diversity means. By design, the program includes students from a variety of racial, socioeconomic, religious, and learning differences, with a majority coming from the East Side of Saint Paul. Most of these are students who without the scholarship support would never attend Hill-Murray, and the student body would not better reflect the racial and economic demographics that encompass the neighborhood in which the school is located.

"Hill-Murray is a better school today because of the Future Leader program," proclaimed Melissa Dan, President of Hill-Murray. "Because of this program, we've been able to reach out to diverse communities and attract students who would have never been able to imagine a Hill-Murray education for their child. We know that a healthy school is economically diverse, and because of the Future Leader program, our school better reflects our surrounding communities. And, by exposing students to a wide range of cultural backgrounds, in and out of the classroom, they learn to adapt to our ever-changing world and embrace those who are different from themselves."



Eric, a senior graduating later this month, had this to say about his experience. "My advice to an 8<sup>th</sup> grader thinking about applying is to take a chance. This place is really where you want to be. It's put a different perspective on my life and everything I want to do. It helps you grow. It helps you find people who have the same mentality as you. It helps you get out of your comfort zone. There's so much in this world you can explore and find, and Future Leaders has helped me discover it."

At the end of the day, this program is about planting seeds that take root and help each Future Leader explore and embrace their future potential. They learn that the sky's the limit. They can do or be whatever they can dream of if a community intentionally wraps its arms around them creating that safe space to be themselves and explore their dreams and passions.

Melissa Dan continues, "In the heart of every student lies a story waiting to unfold. The Future Leader Program provides these students with not only an impactful educational program but also the tools and



confidence they need to find their voice and purpose. The Future Leader program teaches students the resilience to overcome challenges and the courage to pursue success in all of their endeavors. I am excited to watch the future stories of our Future Leaders unfold in the years to come and anticipate great things. "

While we can't wait to find out, the transformative work happening right now is setting the stage for many bright and fantastic futures. "There's so much goodness coming out of the Future Leaders that we don't even know about yet," Denise concluded. "In 10 or 20 years down the road, what

sort of impact was made and what sorts of things did they feel empowered to do because of this opportunity?"

Until then, we're confident that the program is changing lives right now.