

Junior Achievement of South Dakota on a Roll

By Sarah Wetzel for the Plain Talk, Dec 12, 2025



https://www.plaintalk.net/local_news/article_fdab2444-1032-4e9d-97e3-f13bef0b7221.html

Tessa Wilber, senior manager of Student Experiences for Junior Achievement of South Dakota, gave an informative presentation to the Vermillion Rotary last month about the mission and activities of JASD.

“JA (Junior Achievement) is around because we want to help set up our students across the state of South Dakota for success, whatever that means after high school,” Wilber said. “Whether it is a two-year or a four-year (education) or whether they’re going to go right into the workforce after high school, we want to make sure that we can dig deep into those topics that maybe the school doesn’t get to so they can really have a successful future.”

Wilber said JA brings volunteers into the classroom to talk about things like retirement and savings, so they are being educated by more than just social media and advertisements.

“We want them to understand that things they’re doing now can really affect and impact their future,” Wilber said. “And hopefully with these lessons with Junior Achievement they can be impacted in a good way.”

She said the volunteer teachers are community members who are using the saving habits, voting and doing taxes themselves.

“As an outside third party person, the students really just tend to listen and to grasp onto what you’re talking about because they hear from their teacher every single day,” Wilber said. “So, you are coming in as a volunteer, you are fresh, you are new, you’re excited and I can tell you if you do second or fourth grade they are pumped to see you.”

Volunteers are also encouraged to talk about themselves, their lives and their career paths with personal and professional stories related to the curriculum.

“We really want to get it through students’ heads that there’s not one right way to live your life,” she said. “There are tons of paths you could take. There are tons of education journeys.”



Tessa Wilber, senior manager of Student Experiences for Junior Achievement of South Dakota, addresses the Nov. 19 luncheon meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club. Courtesy of Vermillion Rotary Club

All this goes along with the JASD motto which is to “Inspire and prepare young people to succeed in a global economy.”

JASD was established in 1968 and now has a wide reach across the state with over 2,000 volunteers in 42 communities. Wilber handles program management statewide.

“In South Dakota we are actually much larger than people think,” she said. “We last year impacted over 54,000 students across the state which is about one third of K-12 students and we hope to grow every single year.”

Wilber said JASD provides all the curriculum and training that volunteers need so it doesn’t take up too much of the volunteers’ time.

She said the program involves five visits to a classroom for 45 minutes on a flexible schedule.

Volunteers work with teachers to decide on what dates and times work best.

Wilber said Vermillion has a unique way of implementing the middle school program.

“You would actually teach for one day and you would teach the same lesson to five different groups of eighth graders,” she said. “So, you would only have to learn one lesson, but you would teach it five times throughout the day and that always runs right when students get back after the first of the year.”

Wilber said this year the ethics program will be at the middle school. Each year it rotates between the middle school and the high school.

“We completely take over the school when we do this event,” Wilber said. “We run sixth through eighth grade and it is a one-time, one-hour program with a short brief and debrief at the end where we talk about ethics because this is such an important topic for our students to know and this school district supports that and they want the kids to get that every year from sixth to 12th grade.”

The JA Titan program involves five visits to the classroom discussing price, production, marketing, research and development.

“We really talk to these students about what business strategies are like,” she said.

“And then they get to log onto a simulation and compete against each other to be CEOs of a cell phone company and sell the most phones.”

The JA Invest program involves three visits discussing things like savings, budgeting and investing. Students again get to log onto a simulation for a friendly investing competition with their peers.

According to Wilber, the middle and high school programs tend to be more specific and the elementary grade programs are broader.

“Second grade talks about voting and taxes. Hopefully, you all vote and hopefully you all pay taxes,” she said. “So, anyone can teach second grade.”

In the brand-new fourth grade curriculum, Wilber said they discuss careers.

“They get a region of the country and all of the supply and demand and then they get to create a business that would thrive in that area,” Wilber said. “So, they get to really use their imagination in that program which is really fun.”

Middle school programs cover financial education such as savings, budgeting, credit vs debit, etc.

Another brand new program, not yet in Vermillion dubbed JA Finance Park, is a one-time five-hour experience with no training needed.

Volunteers preside over an event where kids take the things they have learned through JA and try to survive a life with a scenario they have been given.

“They will go around and make 20 different budgeting decisions,” she said. “We have really fun budgeting decisions like self-care, vacation, pets and then we have really not fun things like cell phones, bills, health insurance -- all these things that they have to realize that they’ll have to pay. They get to apply for a mortgage; they get to apply for a car loan. Maybe they get it, maybe they don’t so maybe they have to rent for a bit. It really gets the students thinking about how they can be starting to set themselves up for success now.”

Wilber said students will realize things like what kind of career they will need to live the life they want to live and that opens the discussion to things they need to do to get there.

She said there is a strong support system to set volunteers up for success with mandatory new volunteer training and all materials provided.

“And then not only are we available to help support you, however that means, but again, you have so many wonderful community members who have taught Junior Achievement,” Wilber said. “...You have the resources here as well to reach out to your friends and neighbors to ask what is JA like?”

One member of Rotary shared how their uncertainty with teaching turned to confidence after his experience. He enjoyed how the teacher stayed in the room and the children were engaged. Volunteering has turned into a highlight for him even with no prior classroom teaching experience.

Volunteers are also welcome to team teach if they are nervous about teaching on their own.

For those who are not interested in volunteering, Wilber said there are plenty of other ways to support the program, especially with financial contributions to keep JA free to schools.

“We don’t want a school or a student or a classroom not to receive JA because of financial need,” she said. “...We rely on personal donations, company donations, things like that to really support the program and Vermillion programming is not possible without groups like [Rotary].”

According to Wilber, the Vermillion program is short a few volunteers so anyone knowing someone

who might be interested is encouraged to contact her.

“The way we spread the need and spread the awareness of JA is by individual people like you talking about it,” she said. “...We all love and are passionate about what we do at JA of South Dakota and so we hope we can continue to grow and just develop.”

For more information or to volunteer call 605-336-7381 or visit their website at <https://southdakota.ja.org>.