

She works with meal program, helps social emotional learning.

By Nick Blizzard  
Staff Writer



Tracey Nissen has been a guidance counselor at JFK Elementary for nearly two decades.

KETTERING – Tracey Nissen influences the futures of hundreds of young students at John F. Kennedy Elementary School every year, from making sure they don't go hungry to teaching them how to manage their emotions.

A guidance counselor at the Kettering school for nearly two decades, Nissen serves on the

boards of two organizations, including the Kettering Backpack Program that feeds more than 500 students during the school year and was expanded this year to the summer.

"That's one way that we've really been able to help families take a little burden off and make

Throughout December, the Dayton Daily News will tell the stories of people who have persevered and inspired others during this challenging year. Read all the stories at [DaytonDailyNews.com/inspire-dayton](http://DaytonDailyNews.com/inspire-dayton). Tell us who inspired you in 2020 by emailing [Jordan.laird@coxinc.com](mailto:Jordan.laird@coxinc.com)

sure the kids are eating healthy food," said Nissen, a Centerville resident.

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## Inspire

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The Dayton region has a reputation for generosity and banding together in tough times to help one another. Throughout December, the Dayton Daily News will tell the stories of people who have persevered and inspired others during this challenging year.

"Tracey's priority and No. 1 commitment is removing barriers that prevent students from being as successful as they can," according to JFK Assistant Principal Laura Meek. "That has never been more apparent as it is now in these challenging times for our students who are forced to learn remotely."

The 51-year-old Nissen developed a pilot program a few years ago to help kids with social emotional learning.

The program – which has since been adopted throughout Kettering City Schools' K-6 classes – teaches skills for learning, empathy, emotion management and problem solving.

"Those are lifelong skills," Nissen said. "It doesn't matter what age you are or where



John F. Kennedy Elementary School guidance counselor Tracey Nissen (right) has been involved the Kettering Backpack Program for more than 10 years. CONTRIBUTED

you go to school or where you live. Every person needs those skills. So we figure if we start teaching them at the kindergarten level and continue to build on that every year, those skills just get stronger and stronger."

This year – after students began remote learning in the spring due to the coronavirus pandemic – Nissen said she and other elementary

counselors incorporated a Google Slides program to continue the lessons virtually.

"They can do their belly breathing, they can do different ways to calm down when they get frustrated and the teachers are using those throughout the day with the kids constantly," Nissen said.

One common thread with

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Tracey Nissen

remote learning – which Kettering has used for all but a few weeks since March – is "parents feeling unprepared and they're being really hard on themselves," she said.

In her experience, "parents think they are failing their children when it comes to helping them learn at home. They are not! Many parents have taken on this extra challenge and they are really making a difference for their children," Nissen said.

The Kettering Fairmont grad said working to help others has helped her get through the year.

"I'm not on the front lines like the kids doing the classroom stuff," she said. "So I feel like I can be a little behind the scenes and be pushing things out and sharing resources, volunteering

my time to make other things happen for kids – like their general well-being, making sure that they're fed."

Along with the Kettering Backpack Program, Nissen has been involved with Partners for Healthy Youth for about 15 years.

The program feeds kids but also is a bridge for the school district and the community, she said.

"It's just a way to bring kids and adults together to say, 'We care about you. We want you to be successful,' and finding ways to try and help kids find constructive things to do and ways to contribute to their community," Nissen said.

As 2020 draws to a close, Nissen said she's hoping next year will bring a more normal way of life.

"I'm looking forward to being with people ... to be able to gather together and ... to be able to touch people," she said. "To be able to give kids hugs. I just feel distant from people at this time. Just talking on the phone or doing Zoom meetings, you don't get the same feeling."

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