

## Carstens Angels

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*Carstens Elementary School  
Detroit, Michigan*

**I**t's juicy, golden-brown and, for most Americans at Thanksgiving, it's incredibly good eating! But when teachers at Carstens Elementary School look at a holiday turkey they see its potential to be so much more. For the past 15 years, administrators at the elementary school have turned a simple, uncooked turkey into a lesson on community partnering for their students and staff.

It began with a phone call. A man who attended Carstens Elementary School in the 1950s wanted to give back to his alma mater. The holiday season can be a tough time of year for Carstens students, 97% of whom receive free or reduced price lunches. The man on the phone said he wanted to give a turkey to every family who had a child at the school.

Every Thanksgiving since that initial phone call, Carstens students receive a turkey to share with their families. The event takes careful coordination of school staff. Every year the principal assigns a liaison team, usually the school counselor and a teacher, to coordinate with the donor. A week or two prior to delivery, the team works with the school secretary to determine how to allocate the turkeys. In recent years, local churches provided food baskets for families. Carstens staff checks the list carefully to make sure that students receive either a basket or a turkey, guaranteeing that there is enough food for every family at the school.

On delivery day, 5th graders help carry the turkeys to the designated distribution room. Students are called by class to pick up their turkeys. The atmosphere in the classrooms reflects the excitement, but teachers accept the disruption with the understanding that the day is serving a larger purpose.

"Those turkeys are all over the room that afternoon. And all the kids can talk about is how they are going to take the turkey home so their mama can cook it. They feel really good

about taking a gift home to their families," a teacher said.

According to Carstens teachers, the most important part of the project comes not before the holiday, but after. When the students return to school after Thanksgiving, teachers involve them in a massive thank-you card writing campaign. They usually give the donor a plaque, commemorating the experience.

The turkey donation program has spurred the school to partner with other community businesses and organizations. The network of school supporters now is called Carstens Angels. The donations help the school administrator and teachers build tighter relationships with parents, some of whom were, previously, reluctant to come to the school for parent-teacher conferences and open houses.

Students, parents, and staff agree that the program has positively influenced the school. The tradition will continue and partnerships will expand as the opportunities arise.

"It's a beautiful thing—it's for our babies, and it means a lot," a custodian said.

"I love those turkeys!" a 3rd grader chimed in.

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