

Retirees Aid Pupils In Reading

The New York Times

Sunday, October 31, 1999

Westchester

Section 14

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YONKERS

SHAFTS of sunlight streamed through the windows and illuminated the pairs of reading partners who sat at the round wooden tables in the library of Public School 16 here, surrounded by bookshelves full of children's classics. Some studied workbooks, carefully sounding out rhyming words in whispered tones. Others sat and discussed simple storybooks.

Such reading partnerships are a fairly common sight in many classrooms around Westchester, but what makes this one unusual is that the partners span the generations.

Now in its third year, Smart, which stands for Students and Mature Adults Read Together, links retired, older Yonkers adults with elementary and high school school students. The program, which started with 25 volunteers, now has about 95 mentors, who serve 150 students in 7 elementary schools as well as Gorton and Roosevelt High Schools.

Della G. Bryant, principal of P.S. 16, where banners proclaiming the school's yearly reading goals and its celebration of the printed page festoon the building, said: "We love this program. This group cannot wait for Tuesday. It makes the children feel special."

At the elementary schools, volunteer tutors meet with two students for about 45 minutes each during weekly sessions. In the high schools, each volunteer is paired with one student. Students are selected for the program based on their reading test scores; generally, those who score below the 25th percentile on a standardized test are encouraged by their classroom teacher or English teacher to take part in the program with a tutor. The volunteers receive six hours of training before beginning their work with the students.

For the children, it is a special part of their week. "I like books," Trenee McCaulla, 6, a second grader at P.S. 16, said. "You learn about books here."

Guy Isola, 9, a third grader, said: "It's fun to read and everything. I love to read."

Such responses are what makes it worthwhile for volunteers like Ellin Shenker. "The kids are sweet and good, and they try," she said. "If they have any progress, I feel as if I've done something good. I don't want to lunch and shop."

Once tutors start working with the students, training continues to help the volunteers solve problems, suggest strategies help a particular student or handle other issues. In high schools, for example, a student's teacher meets weekly with the tutor to discuss classroom material.

In a training session in Yonkers earlier this fall, Ava Drutman, an instructor of reading and English at Westchester Community College, said to the volunteers: "You come in as someone they trust. This is a shameless and blameless experience for the students. You're giving them tailored instruction to meet that child's needs. You don't want to force them. You want to encourage them. As a mentor, you should be positive at all times. Every child who comes to school wants to learn how to read and write. What you need to know, as a mentor, is to make them understand that you care and want to help. Just building their confidence will give them confidence to do it again. Focus on the wonderful things the student is doing."

Each student has a folder of work, which has been selected by the teacher, to pursue weekly with the tutor.

"The classroom teacher makes up the folder of what's going on in the class," Jannette Swanson, assistant principal at P.S. 16, said. "They send the phonics books and the readers. When the children come back into the classroom, the teachers see the difference."

A first- and second-grade teacher at P.S. 16, Valerie James, said: "The kids who go really look forward to the one-on-one time, with the extra help and special attention. Their confidence level goes up."

The program, which is run under the auspices of the Jewish Council of Yonkers, is also supported by the Westchester County Office for the Aging, the Yonkers Office for the Aging, the Yonkers Public Schools, Mainstream (the Retirement Institute of Westchester Community College), the Retired Senior Volunteer Program and the Reader's Digest Foundation, the Butler Foundation and the Gannett Foundation. Tutors who need it are offered transportation to the schools.

Hadassah's Read Write Now volunteers also take part in the tutoring program at elementary schools.

Janice Lubin Kirschner, program director for the Jewish Council of Yonkers, said, "There's a relationship that develops between the mentor and the student that is special."

The opportunity to make a difference for a child and give something back to their community is a critical motivation for the mentors.

"My two daughters went to Roosevelt High School," said Thelma Liggi, who is in her second year with the program. "I wanted to give something back." ■