

Tutoring program tailors to kids' needs

By Crystal O'Gorman
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The Augustine Literacy Project, a nonprofit tutoring program based in Chapel Hill with a chapter in Charlotte, helped more than 50 students in 30 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools learn to read during the last school year.

Thirty additional tutors will be trained in August and September, but the organization needs financial support.

According to the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus, 40 percent of children have reading difficulties.

"We had to turn down requests for more tutors from nine schools this year," said ALP Director Alison Houser. It costs \$650 to train one tutor, she said.

Tutors pay \$250 to offset training costs, in addition to volunteering 60 hours to tutor in low-income homes with first- and second-graders who read at least one grade level below their peers.

"It is a significant amount of money and time" for the tutors, Houser said. "Tutors provide phenomenal instruction to these students, and they want to know that their time is well spent. ... It's hard to do that if you don't have training."

Houser, who lives in SouthPark's Belingrath neighborhood, began tutoring through ALP in 2012. Prior to that, she volunteered for 11 years at various elementary schools in Mecklenburg County.

Houser said her volunteer efforts left her feeling uneasy about the effect she had on students.

"The teachers didn't have enough time to meet with me and other volunteers to train us or update us on individual students' needs, so I was unsure if I was helping them academically," Houser said.

ALP spends 60 hours training volunteers during a two-week program and five practice lessons with a student

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ALP spends 60 hours training volunteers during a two-week program and five practice lessons with a student

under the supervision of an experienced Augustine tutor.

Volunteer tutors are trained using the Orton-Gillingham approach, which is a multisensory, kinesthetic- and phonics-based program. Other research-based reading material from sources such as the Wilson Reading System also is used.

“We take these components and make each tutoring session interactive by giving them tools and games that help untangle language confusion,” Houser said.

One of the multisensory tools is magnetic letters; student use the letters to form words.

Augustine tutors coach the same student several times a week for the whole school year. Tutors develop relationships with the students and work with parents and teachers to meet that student’s needs.

Marion Idol, who’s been an ALP tutor at Elizabeth Traditional Elementary for two years, said she’s seen how this training program builds confidence in students.

Idol said one of her students, a first-grade boy, was able to read a book to her during their second tutoring session.

“When he finished, I told him that he was a terrific reader and he replied, ‘No one has ever told me that before,’ with the biggest smile,” Idol said.

Idol worked with the boy during first and second grade, and he now reads above grade level.

“Meeting twice a week with a child and planning their individualized lessons is a big commitment, but it has been life-changing for me, and I believe for the students I work with, as well,” she said. “I plan to keep tutoring until I’m too old to carry my tutoring bags anymore.”

The Augustine Literacy Project was founded in Chapel Hill in 1994. Adele Hagood and Candace Armstrong started Charlotte’s ALP chapter in 2004 at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church.

St. Peter’s continues to provide in-kind support through office space and financial assistance.

ALP also receives support from other local churches and organizations, including the Dowd Foundation, Temple Israel, Forest Hills Church and The Merancas Foundation.

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