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# Volunteer tutors make an impact on literacy

BY KATYA LEZIN *Correspondent*

When Kristin Fowler's son, a Beverly Woods Elementary kindergartner, was diagnosed with learning disabilities, Fowler was able to get him the resources and support he needed to get back on track.

"But I worried about children below the poverty line who may not be able to get the help they need or have someone advocating for them," Fowler said.

She got an email forwarded by a friend about volunteers being recruited to give children in predominantly Title I schools one-on-one reading and literacy instruction through Augustine Literacy Project. Fowler, 40, knew she had found a way to help a child in a way she thought was worthwhile. Augustine Literacy Project's mission is to help low-income students improve their reading, writing and spelling through free, long-term, one-on-one instruction. They make this possible with highly trained volunteers.

Alison Houser, 44, has served as the nonprofit's director since 2013. She was the person who wrote the email that Fowler received.

Houser was introduced to Augustine Literacy Project as a volunteer. She worked with students at Sedgefield Elementary through a partnership with Park Road Montessori School, but did not feel her time and efforts were as impactful as they could be.

"All we could really do was serve as a consistent presence," Houser said. She lamented the fact that there was no structure or training for moving the kids forward academically.

When Houser heard about Augustine Literacy Project, she said she was impressed with the "extensive training and research-based approach to reading instruction."

Still, she had to wait several years until she had the time to commit to the 10-day training and volunteer obligation.

That training obligation is now seven weekdays from 9 a.m.-3 p.m., and is offered two to three times each year. Last year, 80 volunteers (including Fowler, who was paired with a student at Huntington Farms) worked with more than 20 schools. They worked with more than 80 students, mostly at Title 1 CMS schools.

"We are making an effort to concentrate at particular schools," Houser said, "so that we can have a greater impact in the school and better support the tutors."

The tutor and the student's teacher typically arrange a time for tutoring sessions on a school day, with a minimum of 60 sessions. Each lasts 45-60 minutes and takes place twice a week. There is no obligation to continue tutoring during the summer, but many tutors opt to do so, keeping up the tutor-student bond and momentum.

Students, who must be a year or more behind in reading levels to receive tutoring, are matched with a tutor when they are in first and second grade. Research provided by Dr. Reid Lyon, formerly of the National Institute of Health, shows that intensive early intervention, like the one-on-one instruction provided by an Augustine tutor, can increase the reading ability of 90 percent of low-performing readers.

Statistics provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation show that if readers reach an average skill level by third grade, 96 percent are expected to graduate from high school.

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Alison Houser, director of Augustine Literacy Project in Charlotte

One of the Augustine Literacy Project's distinguishing features, and one that attracts many volunteers, is its reliance on in-depth training in multi-sensory reading instruction based on the Orton-Gillingham approach. Volunteers use a structured lesson plan format that features direct, explicit, systematic and multi-sensory reading instruction.

“There are multiple pathways to the brain,” Houser said, “so we use audio, visual and tactile approaches to learning.”

For instance, when a student is introduced to a new letter or sound, he may see it, say it, and trace it on a textured surface.

“We are rewiring a child's brain for reading,” Houser said, “because the traditional ways haven't worked.”

Volunteer Julie Richards, 44, who was paired with a student at Sedgefield Elementary School this past academic year, said the training and ongoing support gave her the tools she needed to be successful. Her student even showed the largest reading growth for her grade over the past year.

“I felt empowered to help,” Richards said.

Augustine Literacy Project- Charlotte tutor Melissa Vullo and her student share in the joy of improved reading skills and a special relationship.



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