

washingtonpost.com

Wisdom, Knowledge of Elders Stream Into Area Classrooms

Students, Seniors Benefit From Volunteer Programs

By Maria Glod
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, February 21, 2006; B01

Huddled around a desk at the District's Birney Elementary School, fourth-graders Markell Agnew and Erin Sheffey talked sports with 60-year-old Jon Gundersen.

As the boys shouted that the Pittsburgh Steelers beat the Seattle Seahawks in the Super Bowl, Gundersen sketched a map of the United States on a sheet of paper. He helped the boys place Seattle and Pittsburgh, and then the trio added New York, Canada and the Atlantic Ocean.

"You don't learn if you don't listen," Gundersen said, quieting the pair just a little.

"We have to respect each other," Erin acknowledged, nodding his head.

Gundersen, a 30-year veteran of the State Department who comes to Birney one afternoon each week to talk with Erin about history or homework or life, is among a growing cadre of older adults and retirees who volunteer regularly in schools across the country, helping children learn to read, practice multiplication tables and learn geography.

Similar scenes are playing out across the region and the country. A recent study in Maryland showed that in schools where older adults were a regular fixture -- with volunteers working 15 hours a week -- reading scores went up, and kids had fewer behavioral problems than their peers at other schools. The adults, meanwhile, had fewer falls, expanded their social circles and performed better than their peers on a memory test.

"It seemed to have a big impact on the atmosphere of the schools," said George W. Rebok, a professor at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, who helped conduct the study. "I think what we're tapping into is a sincere desire to help the next generation."

So two days each week, buses from the Greenspring retirement community in Springfield shuttle about two dozen seniors to two Fairfax County elementary schools to work one-on-one with students who need extra help. In Montgomery County, volunteers with the Interages program, all older than 50 but most in their seventies or older, mentor immigrant students and help young children learn to read. At Hollin Meadows Elementary School in the Alexandria section of Fairfax County, 89-year-old Norman Mayer, a former aerospace engineer with NASA, is a weekly fixture in science class.

And Barbara Shear, 73, of the Alexandria section of Fairfax County, responded to a blurb in her community newsletter seeking volunteers. The wife of a foreign service officer, Shear had lived in Nigeria and Senegal. She raised two daughters and worked as a graphic designer.

Slowing down wasn't her idea of fun. So Shear spends two days a week at Hollin Meadows working with children who need extra help and reading during lunchtime sessions that have a book-club feel.

One recent afternoon, Shear settled in with a table of sixth-graders who give up recess for reading. As the kids munched on chicken and cookies, Shear asked about their latest book, the story of young girl killed at

Advertisement



Auschwitz.

"I didn't like some of the sad parts with the Nazis," said Deidra Mensah.

When she was about their age, Shear told them, she had nightmares after seeing photos of concentration camp survivors. "Those people were practically skeletons," Shear said.

Glenna Orr, a reading teacher who coordinates the volunteer efforts at Hollin Meadows and is publishing a book on intergenerational learning, said similar mini-lessons play out frequently as the volunteers draw on years of experience to tell the children about the civil rights movement or life in another country. "Sometimes they have lived the history in the books," Orr said.

The number of U.S. residents 65 and older is increasing dramatically -- from 35 million in 2000 to a projected 54 million in 2020 -- prompting worries about surging Social Security and Medicare costs. But educators such as Orr look at the same statistics and see a growing number of willing volunteers who have the time, talent and energy to help kids learn.

"I see this wealth of knowledge and wealth of expertise," Orr said. "They are competent, and they're educated and they've had interesting lives."

LeRoy M. Owens, Birney's principal, said the volunteers have helped the school, where more than 90 percent of the 410 students come from poor families.

"They come in free of charge. They pull students from the classrooms. They act as role models," Owens said. "Without them, this type of individualized instruction would be almost impossible. It's a service that we could not afford."

One recent afternoon, Virginia Major, a retired geologist who keeps a stash of SpongeBob SquarePants stickers handy, helped Derkwon Johnson learn to read. As the first-grader cut and pasted pictures in a workbook, Major, 65, quizzed him about each one: foot, fork, fence, the number five.

"What do you use a fork for?" Major asked.

"To eat your food," Derkwon said.

"That's right," Major said. "You did great."

LaShauntra Tilley, 7, began working with one of the tutors after her first-grade report card had C's and D's, said her mother, Brenda Tilley, 33. Now the second-grader is earning A's and B's, and she's enjoying reading more.

Education experts said that although pairing seniors with kids can benefit both groups, it takes cooperation from the school and volunteers willing to devote time to make a successful program. Experience Corps, a national group that runs the program at Birney, has paid coordinators.

Arlington school officials have found such success in the senior mentors and tutors that the district is setting up a partnership with the Arlington Learning in Retirement Institute, which offers classes and lectures for people 50 and older.

At Oakridge Elementary in Arlington, about 50 seniors show up twice a week for after-school tutoring in math and reading. Teachers prepare a work plan for each child so the tutors can focus their efforts on each child's troubles.

Principal Lolli Haws said she can't quantify the program's impact, but she likes to say that test scores are good, and "it's no accident that we have a tutoring program." She said the students get more than help with

schoolwork from those sessions.

"It's well-known that our children don't have as much time with adults as they used to have, and children crave that," Haws said. "Parents are so busy working or traveling in professional jobs, or they are working two or three jobs or they're a single parent."

And what do the tutors think?

"You can only play golf or go to museums so often," said Peter Ross, 75, a former banker who tutors at Oakridge. "If you had a busy life and suddenly you're not going to work every day, you want to fill it up."

Edna Brill, 79, one of the self-described "Greenspring grandparents" who lives in the Greenspring retirement community and tutors in Fairfax County schools, works with a child with a health problem that forced her to miss school and another who was born in Russia.

They read, work on abstract thinking and just talk.

"You come home and say, 'Today, I did something worthwhile,' " Brill said.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company