

GREENVILLE JOURNAL

COMMUNITY | MAY 18, 2017 | EMILY PIETRAS

Augustine Literacy Project's tutors help low-income kids improve literacy skills

Views: 18



Reading ability is a key predictor of future academic success, and children who struggle to reach grade-level proficiency early in school may face an uphill battle. [According to Education Week](#), “[A]bsent effective intervention, children who read significantly below grade level by third grade continue to struggle in school and eventually face a much higher likelihood of dropping out altogether.”

In order to catch up, many of these students will require supplemental, individualized instruction outside of the classroom, but not every family has the financial resources to hire a private tutor. An Upstate nonprofit is trying to help fill that need, one student at a time.

Since 2006, the Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate (ALP) has trained volunteer tutors to work with low-income students — those who qualify for free or reduced-price school lunch — who are at least one grade level behind in reading. Some students who receive tutoring through ALP have dyslexia or another learning disability, while others may be “language- or vocabulary-deprived,” says executive director Ann Copeland. “They may have a parent working three jobs who doesn’t have time to read to them.”

The ALP reaches eight elementary schools in Greenville County, two in Pickens County, and one each in Spartanburg and Anderson counties. Currently, 32 tutors work with 36 students.

Prospective tutors undergo 70 hours of rigorous training that includes 15 hours of independent online study followed by classroom instruction. The in-person training largely focuses on watching examples of tutoring sessions, learning how to develop lesson plans, and then practicing lessons and receiving feedback.



Cyndi Wiginton. Photo by Will Crooks

Tutors assist students through a “structured, multisensory” methodology known as the Orton-Gillingham approach, which “helps to match letters to sounds to decode words,” Copeland says. The multisensory component allows students to process reading in an alternative way through a pattern of hearing, saying, touching, seeing, writing, and reading each word.

It costs the ALP \$1,000 to fund training for each tutor, and prospective tutors are asked to pay \$300 upfront for materials. Last year, Dabo Swinney’s All In Team Foundation awarded the ALP an annual grant of \$2,400 for three years, which will cover the upfront cost for 24 tutors, or eight per year.

Copeland says that asking volunteers to pay \$300 helps ensure that they are serious about the time commitment involved in being a tutor, which includes preparing lesson plans and giving 60 hour-long lessons per school year. “If they’ve paid for this stuff [the materials], they’ll tend to use it,” she adds.

Both Cyndi Wiginton and Mark Webber became tutors last summer and are almost finished with their first school year.

Wiginton was drawn to the ALP due to her past enjoyment of teaching kids to read. A mother of five, she home-schooled her children, including a son who is dyslexic. Wiginton thought she could use that experience to help another child. She currently tutors a third-grader who is an ESL student at Cherrydale Elementary.

“She’s still pretty fluent in English, but she doesn’t have the vocabulary background, because her mother doesn’t speak English. All of her vocabulary is from the school setting, which puts her at a disadvantage,” Wiginton says.

Regarding the tutoring experience, she adds, “It’s been very positive for me. The teacher of this student has been so supportive. I think that goes a long way. The student loves it. I can tell she enjoys the individualized attention. I’ve seen progress, which is always encouraging.”

Prior to tutoring with the ALP, Webber already had similar volunteer experience as an instructor at the Greenville Literacy Association (GLA). Over the past six years, he has helped adults ages 18 to 60 prepare for the GED test. Webber says he decided to also volunteer with the ALP because of the opportunity to work with kids and teach the fundamentals of reading. He adds that his time teaching ESL classes at the GLA served as a helpful foundation for tutoring students.



Mark Webber. Photo by Will Crooks

Webber currently tutors two boys, a first-grader and a second-grader, who attend St. Anthony of Padua Catholic School. He's been working with the first-grader since the beginning of the school year and recently started tutoring the second-grader.

"[The first-grader] probably just needed one-on-one attention more than anything. He's very smart, but he had a problem reversing B's and D's and P's and Q's. But after a couple of weeks, I could tell he was getting it. He's reading a lot better, and I can tell he has more confidence now than when I first met him," Webber says of his experience. "I've enjoyed it. I enjoy the kids and the interactions. St. Anthony's has been great."

Leslie Edwards, who is using a pseudonym to protect her daughter's privacy, has noticed remarkable improvement in her child's reading ability thanks to the ALP. Her daughter, who is currently in fourth grade and likely has dyslexia, has been in tutoring for three years.

"She had been struggling for a couple years in a big way," Edwards says. "She didn't have a problem with attention span or anything. She was just struggling to learn her basic ABCs. It's normal for children to reverse letters, but she was just doing it at such a regularity."

The ALP, Edwards says, has been "extremely helpful," and her daughter's tutor "has been wonderful." Her daughter is now reading at grade level and has developed greater confidence in her reading ability.

"She's an old soul and a very personable kid. She appreciates the time with her tutor and the fact that she comes to help her during the school day," Edwards adds.

The Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate will hold two summer training sessions for prospective tutors: June 15–22 and July 27–Aug. 3. For more information, [click here](#).

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