

VICC volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

In the Building Bridges program, three Rockwood reading specialists meet monthly with a group of VICC families at Harris Stowe State University to teach the parents strategies used at school so they can reinforce them at home.

Here, Sharon Arsenault, left, works with parents Ambria Branch and Elijah Clark. "When parents are confident about working with their children at home, they are more apt to do it, which greatly benefits the students," explains Arsenault.

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman



ROCKWOOD EDUCATORS TEACH PARENTS HOW TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN

Teachers Travel Monthly to City for Family Program

by Peggy Magee

A group of Rockwood VICC students have made steady progress in reading and acquired more enthusiasm for learning in general, thanks to a program that teaches parents how to help their children become better readers. The program, Building Bridges, is a partnership between the Rockwood district, the VICC Office and Harris-Stowe State University College of Education.

The guiding principle behind Building Bridges is that parents can impact

their children's mastery of reading and general academic growth by spending time at home working with them. "The idea is to teach parents the language and strategies we use at school so they can replicate them at home," explains Sharon Arsenault, program visionary and reading specialist at Rockwood's Kehrs Mills Elementary School. "When parents can reinforce what their children learn at school, the children will make more progress."

The idea for the program came about when Arsenault and two other Rockwood reading specialists, Terry Brown of Ellisville Elementary and Lisa Lennon of Kellison Elementary, discov-

ered their shared passion for wanting all children to be academically successful. They attended workshops about the achievement gap to learn what can be done to close it. "The research overwhelmingly points to the power of relationships between school and home," notes Lisa Lennon. To build those relationships, the trio — on a volunteer basis — travel to parents and involve them in a project to benefit their children."

After months of planning, collaborating and training, Building Bridges began in earnest last September. Meetings are held evenings, generally the third Tuesday of the month, at Harris Stowe.

See inside, Rockwood Educators Teach Parents

WINTER
2014

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ROCKWOOD EDUCATORS TEA

Gathered together are the three Rockwood reading specialists and six families. Family participation is based on the students' normed test scores (bench mark data) and the interest and commitment of the parents. The children, who range from kindergarten to grade seven, accompany their parents and the evening begins with dinner and fellowship. The meal, along with other supplies needed for the program, are purchased with Rockwood grant funds and support from the VICC Office.

Several of the parents received training from the reading specialists last school year and are designated as parent coaches. After the reading specialists present the evening's material, the parent coaches get together with the other parents and work with them

on what was covered. "Research shows that people understand best when they learn from someone with whom they feel comfortable and can relate," explains Lisa Lennon about the parent-to-parent arrangement.

While the parents are busy in one classroom, the children are in another, being tutored one-on-one in reading by Harris-Stowe

students who, as education majors, are taking courses in language arts, reading and writing and children's literacy. Prior to when the families arrive, the Harris students receive training specific to Rockwood from the reading specialists, the same training the parents receive. Afterwards, the college students meet up with the others for dinner before pairing off to work with their assigned students. "It's valuable

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Sharon Arsenault

for our students to apply the skills and knowledge they have learned in their college classes under the direction of elementary educators," notes Betty Porter Walls, assistant professor of education at Harris.

The strategies the reading specialists teach cover fluency, accuracy, comprehension and expanding vocabulary and include the Six-Minute Solution (Adam Brown, 2004) for reading fluency, the short and long vowel chart for developing accuracy and the much loved Beyonce Bounce, used to decode multi-syllable words. They

learn how to work with students to improve comprehension. And they realize, thanks to the reading specialists' frequent reminders, that children grow and become more successful when they read with someone.

Arsenault sums up the importance of the training: "When parents are confident about working with their children at home, they are more apt to do it, which greatly benefits the students." She cites testing data on the participating students showing steady gains in reading. "In addition, we're seeing improved study skills, better homework routines and more organization from these students."

Parent coach Kevin Dabney can attest to the benefits that come from, as he says, "being given the skills to follow up at home with what my child learns at school." Since he and his wife Lajoy joined the program, they have been working more with their daughter Amariyah, a second grader at Westridge Elementary. "Reading had been a challenge for her, but now

it's fun," Kevin Dabney points out, attributing that change in attitude to her improved skills. "When children see their parents take an interest in their education, they realize the

importance of it and become more responsible."

The Building Bridges session concludes with the children joining their parents for skill practice on what each of them learned that night. Parents leave with reading fluency practice packets to be completed by next month's meeting. Simple incentives are awarded to families who complete them. In addition, parties also serve as incentives, according to Arsenault, "because it's an opportunity to celebrate achievements and build relationships."

It's not enough to say that Building Bridges is a win-win situation because the benefits are multi-pronged. The children win because their reading and study skills are improving. The parents win because their children are making academic progress and more excited about learning. And the college students win because they gain valuable training and experience and earn required professional development credits in preparation for their future careers.

Building Bridges could, in fact, be described as a "win x 4" because the Rockwood specialists have attended education workshops where they share with elementary educators and college professors from across the country information about the Building Bridges program and its success. "It is our hope that other districts will launch the program so that, little by little, we can narrow the achievement gap," notes Arsenault. "It takes all of us working on it to truly make a difference."

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