

Spreading Literacy

02 Aug 2023

Boys & Girls Club of the Plateau seeks volunteers for reading program

By LISA GRAY YOUNGBLOOD



We have a problem.

More than 43 million adults in the United States cannot read or write above a third-grade level. Worse, one in four children will grow up without learning to read at all. According to the Department of Education, only 35% of public-school students are proficient in fourth grade, and less than a quarter of the remaining 65% will find their way to proficiency. Children with low literacy

rates are much more likely to skip or drop out of school and to exhibit behavioral issues that may well bleed into adulthood. Most distressingly, according to data compiled by the National Center for Education, two out of three students who are not proficient in reading by the end of fourth grade end up in jail or on welfare.

These are sobering statistics for sure, but they are not cemented. Although a solution to illiteracy is complex and multi-faceted, there are many individuals and organizations committed to helping. One such organization is right here on the plateau.

Beginning this fall, The Boys & Girls Club of the Plateau (BGCP) will offer a specialized tutoring program focused exclusively on reading. This program will be offered at no cost to students or their families. As Carmen Waite, Executive Director of BGCP, explains, "The mission of BGCP is to enable young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens. Academic success is a key outcome to reaching our mission. Bringing our young members up to grade level in reading will ensure they are successful at school and support their long-term success."

Initially, the tutoring program will focus on first and second graders. "Research data indicate that children who cannot read by the end of third grade are at risk for a number of negative outcomes including later school dropout," explains Dr. Pat Morse, BGCP Board member, licensed clinical social worker, and the brainchild for this program. "Our hope is that this evidenced-based reading program will contribute to the success of the children of the plateau. By starting with younger students, we can have the biggest impact and help prevent the expansive spread of illiteracy."

After the program is well established, BGCP intends to expand the offerings to older students, Morse says. "BGCP also hopes this program can serve as a pilot and, once shown to be successful, be a model for Boys & Girls Clubs across the US." What a wonderful opportunity for the plateau—to be an

integral part of a solution to a national crisis.

What is most unique about this program is its volunteer base. BGCP will train volunteers who are willing to make a year-long commitment to work with a single student twice a week. Each tutoring session will be one hour. Ideally, this commitment would span two years. Volunteers do not need teaching experience although they will go through extensive training and be provided materials that methodically walk them through the curriculum.

The process of teaching reading may seem daunting, but the BGCP tutors will be well-trained and supported. Betsy Robinson, Nancy West and I will conduct the training at no cost to tutors. All three of us have twenty years or more experience in teaching students to read. The curriculum will be phonics-driven and based on the nationally recognized Wilson Reading System and the Orton-Gillingham Approach, in which we are each extensively well-versed. Students will be assessed at the start of tutoring and every four months thereafter using the WADE Assessment Tool. This assessment tool focuses on phonemic awareness and will offer reliable empirical evidence of the success of the program.

The initial training will take place over the course of a week and will include demonstrations and simulated lessons. Tutors will each be provided a Wilson Introductory Kit, which includes all materials necessary for the program, a lesson-plan template to help structure each lesson, and a “scope and sequence” outlining the order in which concepts should be introduced. We will hold monthly lunch-and-learn meetings for continuing education and tutor development and support.

Dr. Lynn Dillard, BGCP board member and Jackson County School Board Representative, not only supports the program but is also excited about the curriculum. “From an educational perspective and as a former teacher and school and district administrator, I have for years heard presentations from many publishing companies regarding the efficacy of their reading programs using ‘buzz’ words such as ‘peer-reviewed’ and ‘highly correlated with the

State's curriculum.' Yet, during those same years, reading proficiency continued to decline, which begs the question, 'Why are we changing what worked for so long?' The Wilson Program, which is the basis of the BGCP tutoring program, is different. As an older phonics-based reading program that actually worked so well for many years, we can be confident in its success. Beyond word recognition, students are given the tools to sound out words using letter sounds and phonetic rules. I am very excited to endorse the BGCP's effort to return to the 'tried and true' method of teaching reading."

On a personal note, I have been a reading tutor for twenty years, and it is one of the most rewarding aspects of my life. There is nothing quite like the smile that lights up a child's face when she can finally—and to her mind quite suddenly—decipher words on a page. The whole world opens. Opportunities multiply exponentially. Further, working together over the course of a year or more, a special bond forms between tutor and student. A tutor gets to know the child in a unique, layered way, and the tutor grows as well. There is something remarkable about seeing the world through the lens of a child, which most certainly happens, and about the privilege of playing a pivotal role in that child's success.

If you are interested in becoming a tutor and have the time to invest, we would love to have you. If the commitment is too large, you could also offer financial support. The materials we have chosen will cost \$350 per tutor. Additional expenses include organizational materials and assessment tools, which will total approximately \$75 per tutor, for a grand total of \$425 per tutor. Training will be offered at no cost. To learn more or to make a donation, please contact Carmen Waite at carmen@bgcplateau.org or Lisa Youngblood at lisagyoungblood@gmail.com.

Program Overview

One-on-one tutoring two times a week, each session 1 hour
Tutors trained in nationally recognized phonics programs

Continued tutor support

Regular assessment of progress

Initial offerings open to first and second graders with an intent to expand program

Tutors and Trainers will work on a volunteer basis

Tutoring free to students

One-to-two year commitment for tutors and students