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BETTER TOGETHER

Herbert and Sarah M. Gibor
Reading Partners Program

July 2017

Marlyn's Message

We've just completed our 18th year of service to the Stamford community and it was an exciting year with new initiatives. We partnered with a new school, the recently named The New School at Strawberry Hill, an extension of the Rogers School International Baccalaureate system. The school started with grades K & 1 and they are still in the process of renovating the physical layout. We hope to grow our team there as they add more grades and redesign the school space. Next, we administered a Reading Survey to our students in grades 1-3. This was the first time we had used this survey to determine changes in reading habits over the year. See below for more on the results. Third, I represented Reading Partners in a community wide collaboration called Cradle to Career. The goal of this ongoing initiative is to pool the resources of the Stamford Public Schools and the many agencies and programs that seek to ensure a healthy, strong and educated youth who leave high school confident and prepared for the next step in life.

As you go about your summer activities, talk up the program and invite friends and family into the community of Reading Partners. We are always on the lookout for new, eager participants and I appreciate the opportunity to talk with them.

Best wishes for a relaxing, inspiring, fun summer.

Marlyn



Happy Faces of the Program



Springdale School Reading Partner Cynthia Hoffman with her happy readers at their year end party. All our students receive a book and a certificate of accomplishment at year end.

The year end parties we make at the 13 elementary schools are a sweet way to end our service. It is often difficult for both the students and volunteers to say Good-bye after an entire year of getting to know each other and spending time together. Many students are shy or hesitant in the Fall but by Springtime, they've become adjusted to the program and to their partners.

Each school creates their own unique party for the children. Some do it outside and invite parents every year to join them. Another one sets a beautiful table in a conference room and while the children are feasting on cupcakes, the reading specialist reads a specially chosen book for them. Another school emphasizes the speeches that every volunteer has prepared in which they extol the progress of their students. This year we gave away approximately 250 books to the school students and to the 2 after school programs we service. These book purchases were made possible by the fundraising we did this year and through several generous donations.

Volunteer Appreciation Breakfast



Toby Miller and Lenore Cooper survey breakfast delicacies at the event

Reading Partners and program supporters gathered for the annual breakfast on May 22 at the JCC (Jewish Community Center.) Each year, this event highlights the unique character of the year and this year's theme was the number 18. This was the 18th year of service to the Stamford community and 18 represents Life in Jewish philosophy.

Director Marlyn Agatstein welcomed the attendees describing the lifeblood of the program—the dedicated volunteers, team leaders, and partnering Stamford Public School employees who support us and provide consultation and workshops.

Brian Bianco, Educational Director at Curtain Call, was featured speaker and he emphasized the role that authors have in creating new worlds for people through texts in plays and books. During the Q&A, it was noted that he has admirers in the community for his body of work at Curtain Call.

In 1988, literacy researcher Smith observed that " the emotional response to reading...is the primary reason most readers read, and probably the primary reason most nonreaders do not read." Over the years, Reading Partners has amassed much anecdotal evidence that students relish the opportunity to read one on one with a partner. But, could the program demonstrate any more definitive data showing reading attitude changes over the course of the year's reading partnerships? Utilizing the framework of the unique personal relationships between the students and volunteers, I sought a tool that might capture this particular factor in reading. With the help of a Reading Specialist, I found the "Elementary Reading Attitude Survey", which was devised in 1990 and is available online to teachers and literacy programs. It's easy to learn and could be administered easily within our volunteer 1/2 hour of service time.

In the fall of 2016, Reading Partners gave the survey to our student partners, in grades 1-3. Team Leaders at various schools taught their teams how to administer the survey and then the volunteers were asked to give it to their students on the second visit of the year. The survey asked questions related to how students felt about different kinds of reading situations. Four Garfield the Cat poses, ranging from "very happy" to "very upset" were used to aid students' answers. The survey was administered both in the Fall, when the students were new to the program and in the Spring of 2017 after being in the program the entire school year. The survey consisted of 20 questions, 1/2 relating to academic reading and the other 1/2 to leisure reading. Scores were tallied based on the answers, using 4 points for "very happy" answers and 1 point for "very upset".

This was the first time that the program attempted to quantify students' outcomes in reading, using a measure of attitude change, versus using outcomes of reading scores or comprehension tests.

Learning the survey and administering it was a new strategy for all of us. Here are some of the results:

Numbers: # Schools that participated = 9

Students who took the survey both in the Fall and the Spring = 61

Students who took the survey only once, either the Fall or the Spring = 30

Findings: Coming into the program, an overwhelming majority of students had a positive attitude toward reading and maintained a positive attitude over the course of the school year. Of the 9 schools that participated, 74% of the participating students went up in their attitude scores. Overall, the total raw scores for the 61 students in both academic and leisure reading showed a decrease in their reading attitudes. However, in the Spring, the reading attitude scores just in the leisure reading areas increased.

Big Jumps: 5 of the 61 students showed at least a 20% increase in scores. Of these, one student at Springdale, Jessica, went up 73%! Another student, Jeremy at Newfield, went up 43%.

Take away: This was a small sample size and just a few students' scores affected the whole outcome of the survey results. The overall results from Fall to Spring showed a decline in reading attitude but when we look just at the leisure scores, there was an improvement. This is a good sign because once a student starts to enjoy leisure reading more, it's hopeful that they'll find academic reading more palatable. It is noteworthy that many students commented they had never been to a bookstore. 35 of the 61 students' scores went up overall and that is a tremendous success story. We have always known that our strength lies in the one-on-one partnership and this survey bares out the conviction that we can play a role in serving and supporting the students on their upward trajectories.

Thanks to all who participated ! It was a first for all of us and I knew that I could count on you to be on board, to learn the survey, and to appreciate the goals of maintaining the highest standards

Being A Collaborative Partner

The Federation for Jewish Philanthropy of Upper Fairfield County is considering starting their own Reading Partner type program. Last month I met with a staff member and 2 lay leaders from that organization to share documents and ideas about how to start up a program. They had approached a principal in Bridgeport where just 12% of the students meet Connecticut proficiency literacy levels.

Based on our own history and program experience, I was able to consult with them and provide information about timetables, growth, recruitment, mission delineation and funding.

I am honored that they thought of us and understood their program is a definite "Go!" after hearing about our framework. If you know of anyone in the Upper Fairfield County area or in Bridgeport who might want to be involved, contact me.

Happy summer! I'll be busy recruiting, planning, reading.
Stay in touch.

Marlyn Agatstein
203-321-1373 x 115
Readingpartners@ujf.org