

Shaping Futures: One Word, One Child at a Time (continued)

by Beth Davey

Research supports Hart's assessment. An Annie E. Casey Foundation study in 2012 found that "students who don't read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave without a diploma than proficient readers."

Read To Succeed Asheville is fighting back. Started in 2009, the non-profit now reaches 140 elementary students in select Asheville and Buncombe County schools to help at-risk children reach grade level reading.

Twice a week for two years, Hart has opened the world of words to a young girl at Vance Elementary School. "I find it very rewarding. I feel very needed and appreciated, and I feel like I'm making a difference," she says. Hart is overjoyed watching the 8-year-old go from dreading their reading sessions to confidence as her skills improve.

Sarah Bevington, who retired recently to Asheville from Wisconsin, embraces the challenge of helping a six-year-old boy from Asheville Primary School. Bevington knows that strong reading skills will likely make or break this youngster's educational success and future. In fact, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 68 percent of the nation's state prison inmates are dropouts. The window to reverse this trend is brief. By grade four, reading proficiency may predict the course of a youngster's entire future.

Bevington volunteers once a week as a Reading Buddy with Read To Succeed Asheville. Although she's tutored math previously, this is her first foray into literacy. "The training and support from the staff and other volunteers are excellent," she says, noting the challenges in these youngsters' lives. "A lot of these kids have very stressful lives because of their socio-economic situation. Also, many of these children from low-literacy homes have never owned a book."

Volunteers like Hart, Bevington, Bonnie Wheeler and other OLLI members help make it possible for Read To Succeed to close the literacy gap for many such children. Diane Amos, a member of the group's Board of Directors, attends OLLI New Member Orientations to acquaint newcomers with Read to Succeed and to sign up volunteers. "It's a natural fit," Amos explains. "These people want to give back, they have the time, they have the expertise to learn new things, so it's been a very successful partnership."

Volunteer Recruitment Coordinator Julie Claywell agrees. "Our Training Director shares success stories from fellow Coaches and Buddies that confirm the positive impact we are having in the schools. Each week, I see the eagerness on our students' faces when we arrive. There is nothing more rewarding than the bright smile and excitement when your student masters that new word or skill, and you find they have achieved a higher reading level."

For more information, visit www.r2sasheville.org or contact Julie Claywell to learn how to get involved in the upcoming school year. Email volunteer@r2sasheville.org or call (828) 251-4949.