Better Together: Meet Tutors Sandra and Saundra

By Linda Eggbeer | STAIR Board of Directors



There's a spark between them when they talk about STAIR. Their faces light up and the connection between them shines through in their body language and in everything they say. Saundra James and Sandra Douglas, tutors at Van Bokkelen Elementary School in Severn, have been working together since they joined STAIR in 2023 and have shared the same student (all boys so far!) each year since. "We just synced immediately!"

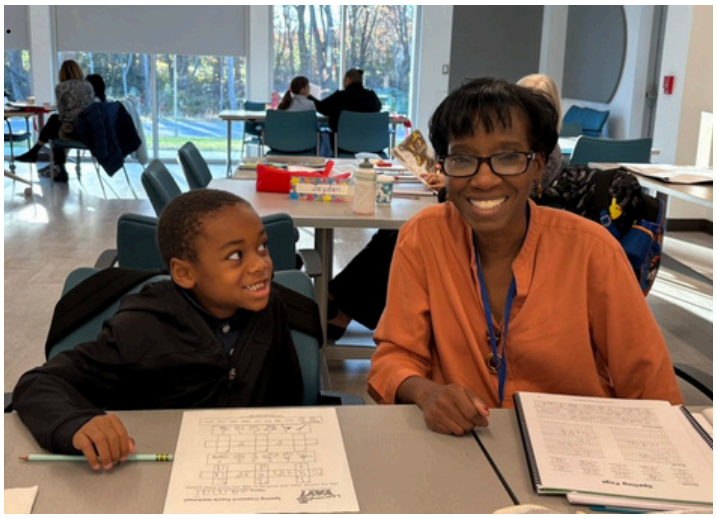
When I recently sat down with Sandra and Saundra, they told me that they learned about STAIR from people they knew and from flyers they saw in the community. They each investigated the program and realized that becoming STAIR tutors would allow them to help fulfill a goal each knew was incredibly important - helping young children learn to read well. They decided to sign up and give it a try and they said they're so glad they did!

"We're in it together."

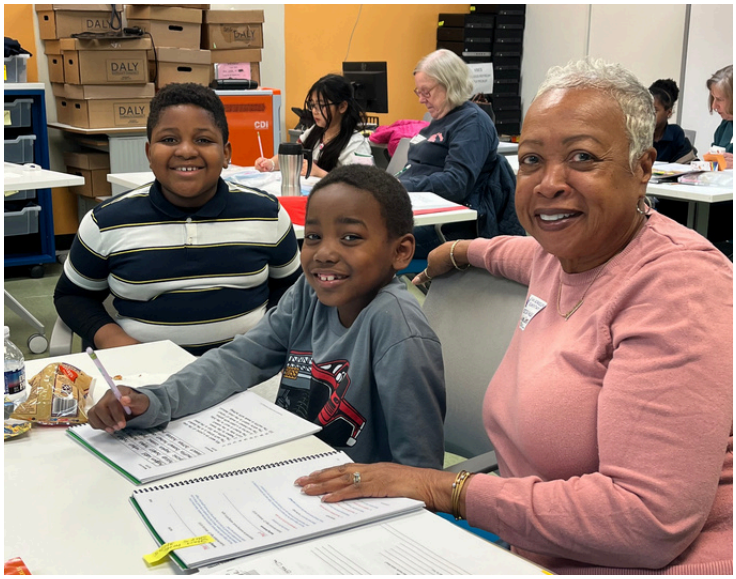
"When they were paired their first year - each tutoring one day a week - instead of leaving notes for each other about what they had done on a particular day, they decided to pick up the phone and talk about Arnold, their first STAIR student.

How did he do today? How did you get him to settle into the activities? Let me tell you what he said to me today!" It felt really important that they directly share the details of their individual sessions so they were on the same page about exactly what he needed the next time he came to STAIR. As time went on, they started getting together for lunch and, regardless of where the conversation started, it always ended up with how Arnold was doing! "Two heads are better than one" is their take on things and "we're in it together" epitomizes their approach to building strong relationships with their students and with each other.

Their deep belief in the critical role that reading plays in early development and life-long success is epitomized by their mantra - "Reading is knowledge; knowledge is power" which they impart often to their students - with an accompanying fist bump!



Saundra described a Read Across America event when guests come in to read to STAIR students. This particular time, one of their former students - a 3rd grader - was invited to read. After he finished, Saundra asked him if he'd sit in on her lesson that day and give her suggestions about how she was working with her student. He took her up on the offer and at the end of the session made a couple of helpful comments she then began using.



They told me they like working with the PRIDE curriculum and believe it serves their students well. Sandra did admit that she wishes they had another 15 minutes because the time goes so quickly. They also talked about how much they appreciate the support STAIR staff and the school liaison provide throughout the year. The Volunteer Appreciation event in the spring is particularly meaningful to them because they're able to come together with tutors from across all of STAIR's sites and celebrate their work together. They also described how much they love the way site coordinators and tutors at Van Bokkelen share ideas with each other about special approaches they try with their individual students.



With fellow tutors at STAIR's Anuual Volunteer Appreciation Event

They talked about how fun and reinforcing it is when they run into former students and parents when they're out in the community. They ask light-hearted questions about how the students are doing and whether they're reading every night! And parents always share how their children are doing and express their continuing appreciation for Sandra's and Saundra's roles in their development.

As I listened, I was struck by how much respect Saundra and Sandra have for the students they work with and for each other. They talked about how rewarding it is to be able to make a positive impact on young children who move from being afraid or hesitant to read when they enter the program to reading with confidence and pride. The relationships they establish with their students are deep and lasting and they believe they benefit as much from the STAIR experience as the students do. "We can barely keep our emotions under control at graduation when our students can stand up and and read a book aloud. Nothing compares to being able to contribute to a child's strong start in life."