

AUG 2015: A Community for Literacy: It Takes a Village

A COMMUNITY FOR LITERACY: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

It's just another summer morning in Edenton, North Carolina. A warm breeze rolls off the small town's marina, the smell of salt is in the air along with the chirp of elementary schoolers entering the Shepard-Pruden Memorial Library. That's right – even in the summertime, dozens of White Oak Elementary students in kindergarten through second grade are filing into the library as well as classrooms across the county to practice reading.

Around 10 a.m., students gather at the front doors of one of four summer tutoring locations: J.A. Holmes High School, the public library, the local Boys & Girls Club or White Oak Elementary.

Upon arrival, students quickly take their seats and begin an activity. Some read aloud quietly with a teacher or instructional assistant, some work silently on worksheets or projects. All of the students have one thing in common – they remain focused and engaged until the very end of the hour-long tutoring session.

White Oak's summer tutoring program, an initiative piloted this year, is free to all students and accessible to the low-income housing areas in Edenton.

"There is a proven link between poverty and lack of school readiness, so I wanted to reach the kids who need us right where they are," said Michelle White, program founder and former principal of White Oak Elementary School. "Many of the students who would most benefit from extra help in the summer months can't get that help simply because they don't have access to an affordable means of transportation. For some of our families, a location 10 minutes out in the county might as well be three hours away."

By bringing programs such as summer tutoring to students, families realize how important it is for children to use the summer as an opportunity to learn, said White. These programs also help parents to realize that caring teachers are what makes these opportunities possible, she added.

Tutoring sessions are literacy-focused. Teachers and instructional assistants use individualized instruction to help students build a strong language base. Placement in tutoring groups is based on each student's academic and social needs, as noted throughout the school year by White Oak teachers.

"We really know our kids," said White. "We know their families, and we know their social environments. Having that information allows us to adapt our instruction in a way that truly resonates with each student."

For some students, this can mean quiet, individual reading while others benefit more in group settings. If teachers notice that a student responds best to a male teacher, the student can be assigned to read with Jared Marks, this year's D.F. Walker Elementary School Teacher of The Year. Other students who relate more to female teachers and teamwork are able to read aloud and discuss their books in groups with Angie Walston, who focuses on building their excitement for making progress as a team.

“Are you doing your summer reading at home?” Walston asked her students. “I’m done with my packet!” “I just need one more to finish,” some responded with excitement.

“All of us do all we can to really get these students and their families excited about reading and learning,” said White. “We want them to realize learning is fun!”

And these efforts pay off. Tutoring slots are full nearly every day the program is offered, and test scores have been improving.

“In 2011, 57 percent of our students were proficient in reading. Since then, we have jumped to 80-percent proficiency,” said White. “This growth wouldn’t be possible without our incredible instructors, who are wholeheartedly invested in these students, along with the network of community programs and partnerships available for these kids in Edenton.”

This network of support is far-reaching. Between summer tutoring and other free programs, nearly every member of the Edenton-Chowan community plays a role in improving education. Parents participate in programs such as Mommy & Me, in which volunteers model for parents how to learn through play. The Boys & Girls Club provides grants to support tutoring sessions for two days a week. Churches collaborate to donate books, and much more.

Students even have access to free books all summer long thanks to a special program. After tutoring is over, and even after the public library’s summer reading program ends, dozens of students rush out to catch the Summer Santa bus. Teachers and community members volunteer their time to stock an Edenton-Chowan Schools bus with books donated by organizations from across the county. The bus carries between 8,000 and 10,000 books across town and stops at locations such as the grocery store in town and the park. Students anxiously await the arrival of this white school bus. As it rolls around the corner, students cannot wait to explore the seats that are full of bins with books collected for them.

The Summer Santa bus has been running for two years, and, just like the tutoring sessions, it serves Edenton students, no matter where they live. Students, visitors and even parents can board the bus, fill their bags with new and gently-used books and take them home to keep for as long as they’d like. Students also can enjoy ice cream sandwiches and reading with the bus volunteers.

“I had a hard time finding a slot to volunteer this week,” said Walston, who also serves as a tutor at the public library site. “They were all full! But there’s always tomorrow.”

White said the idea for the Summer Santa bus came from State Superintendent June Atkinson’s *Give Five – Read Five* campaign (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/give5read5/>). With such strong support from so many community partners, it is no surprise that White Oak won this year’s *Give Five* competition by collecting 13,000 books – the most books collected among all 276 participating schools in the state.

Including White Oak Elementary, there are four schools in the Edenton-Chowan Schools district. One school serves grades pre K-2, another serves grades 3-5, one serves grades 6-8, and the remaining school serves grades 9-12. To learn more about the school district and its programs, visit

www.ecps.k12.nc.us.

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