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# Program devised to sharpen reading skills of youth at CJCF

By Amanda Plotts Staff Reporter 4 hrs ago

The ability to read is the key to success for youth at the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility. Although many of the youth are reading below their grade level, that does not discourage them from wanting to improve.

With the help of the Reading Zone program, the youth are getting the skills and practice they need to improve reading skills. However, lack of volunteers for the program is limiting the number of students who can participate.

The program is a volunteer, one-on-one reading/mentoring program for male youth reading below a sixth grade level who reside in the facility.

According to teacher Mary Latorre, 50 percent of the youth at the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility read at or below a fifth grade reading level, based on assessments.

When Latorre performs assessments on the students to determine their reading level, she said that many have no family support, have been running the streets and cannot remember the last time they had been in class.

Once a student struggles in school and falls behind, it is easy for them to stop going altogether and Latorre tries to stress to the students that their future is going to be impacted by their ability to read. One of the biggest challenges will be filling out a job application.

“Whatever time I have with them, they begin to grasp how important reading is,”

Latorre said.

Students are not required to participate in the program, but those who do are pulled from class for 30 minutes each day for one-on-one reading. Students are allowed to stay in the program for as many months as they like or until they leave the facility.

It can be challenging at times for Latorre as there are 19-year-olds in the facility who are reading at a second grade level and it can be difficult to ask a 19-year-old to read a book intended for a second grade student.

"He's not interested in it," she said.

The program is set up so if the students are participating in the program four days a week for 30 minutes they will make monthly gains.

Bryant has been participating in the Reading Zone for one month and can already see improvement.

"It will help me in the future and it is something I really need," he said.

Currently, there are six youth in the program but the lack of volunteers is an issue. With the lack of help there is a possibility of having to cut students from the program.

"When they are this far behind, the only thing that will help them is one-on-one," Latorre said.

She estimates that there are 20 to 30 more students who need help in reading and would like to join the program.

To be a mentor, you must pass a criminal background check, attend a one-day training, be willing to mentor youth in reading for two hours a week, follow prescribed lesson plans and provide comments for each mentoring session.

Anyone interested in volunteering does not have to know how to teach. Latorre prepares the lesson plan ahead of time and instructions are laid out for each volunteer.

Kathy Reed, of Ashville, has been volunteering once a week since the program started in February 2014. She said the program is very rewarding, and as the students' reading skills increase, she notices a change in their demeanor.

Reed said the issue with youth having trouble reading is "right out our backdoor in Pickaway County."

Although she was intimidated at first to come to a correctional facility, she soon realized the youth are just like everyone else.

"I like to see them happy and feel good about themselves," she said.

Volunteer Morgan Stoney, a student at Ohio Christian University, saw a need at the facility and wanted to help. Stoney did not know what to expect when she first started but soon realized she was not concerned with what the youth had done in the past — she wanted to help them.

"I can't always relate to them, but I try my best to get them where they need to be," Stoney said.

There are circumstances at the facility that make it difficult for students in the classroom, but Stoney said the students never take it out on her.

"I like that they put in the time and effort to come in and help us," Bryant said about the volunteers.

Reading Zone is sponsored by the Ohio Department of Youth Services in collaboration with the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities.

For more information on becoming a mentor contact Mary Latorre at 740-571-8273 or

by email at [mary.latorre@dys.ohio.gov](mailto:mary.latorre@dys.ohio.gov).



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