
READING BOOK BAGS 'N BUDDIES

Viroqua Elementary School

Viroqua, Wisconsin

Viroqua Elementary School piloted a community volunteer-based literacy program in January 2000 to build the literacy skills of below-level students to grade level. Along the way, we wanted to help children feel good about themselves and about their abilities, as well as tap the talents and experiences of community volunteers to help accomplish our goals.

Although the program will be fully implemented in the 2000-2001 school year and serve about 40 children, we believe we learned enough during our pilot year in 1999-2000 serving 18 children to share our experiences with other schools.

VISTA volunteer Mary Mulvaney-Kemps, school reading specialist Tammy Mastin, and elementary principal Kathy Trussoni started this partnership activity by creating 35 book bags, each containing books and activities surrounding a curriculum-based theme. From January through mid-April, the VISTA volunteer organized the program. We selected students for participation in the program based on teacher recommendations. The VISTA volunteer then telephoned the parents of each student and scheduled separate meetings to explain the program and gain parents' support for it, both through the child's participation at school and through parent learning activities at home. At the end of April we piloted the program with eighteen students and three volunteers: the VISTA volunteer, the school reading specialist, and Wayne Sherry, the school superintendent. The purpose of the pilot program was to determine the effectiveness of the books and activities, the selection process, parent orientation, and scheduling.

A volunteer met with a child once a week for 30 minutes. Students in Grades 1 to 3 met with their volunteer before school at 7:30 a.m. or after school at 3:15 p.m. Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children met with their volunteers at various times during the school day. Families selected the time and day that worked best for them. The child and volunteer chose a theme and a book bag together. They then read the books and did the activities together, completing each bag in two to six weeks.

Children from both elementary schools in the Viroqua School District participated in this program. Since parents in the district can choose which school they would like their elementary-age child to attend, a daily school bus runs between Viroqua Elementary and Liberty Pole Multiage School. Liberty Pole students participating in the program rode the bus to Viroqua Elementary, where their parents picked them up.

Students seldom missed their chance to meet one-on-one with their adult volunteer. Since children met with their volunteer in a private location, there was no peer pressure from others in the room. The volunteers had no set curriculum to complete so the pace was relaxed and allowed the student and volunteer to build a relationship. The confidence that children gained from the relationship, as well as from improving their literacy abilities, helped in all aspects of their education.

At the end of the school year, each child received a photo of himself with his/her volunteer and a book to keep. The children thought this was fantastic! One little kindergarten girl met a teacher in the hallway just after receiving her photo. Beaming, she showed off her photo and book. The teacher asked if she was able to read. "I can read only one book," the little girl said, and proceeded to recite a story she had read with her volunteer. You can bet that she will be eager to read more books when she gets to first grade!

Costs for this program were minimal. The VISTA volunteer's salary was paid by a federal Americorps grant through Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI). A local company donated \$1,000 to purchase books for the program. In addition to donations of books and other materials from teachers and several school district residents, a local bookstore gave us a 20% discount and lots of help in deciding on the books to fill each book bag. A local discount store donated the fabric for the book bags and a volunteer sewed them.

The results of the pilot were very encouraging. Students, parents, volunteers, administrators, and school board members were supportive of the program. We all thought it was special that the school superintendent, Mr. Sherry, was a volunteer. For the 2000-2001 school year we will have 18 new volunteers, including 10 residents of a local nursing home. Children paired with a resident of the home will be bused to the home after school. A school bus stop is already located at the nursing home, so there will be no cost to the school district. The other eight volunteers will come to school at various times throughout the day. A training program for the volunteers will be conducted in August 2000.

For the upcoming school year, we will obtain some leveled readers that are repetitive and easily memorized. Even for second and third grade students, books that are late first grade to early second grade level will be appropriate. Books that might appear too easy to adults will give beginning readers confidence. The motivation and the confidence that children gain from a sense of mastering the book is the essence of this program and makes additional progress possible.

Mary Mulwaney-Kemps, Literacy Volunteer
(608) 637-1122; mulmar@viroqua.k12.wi.us