



Public Media
Issues & Voices that Matter

**Commentary
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by Connie O'Hanlon, coordinator, Reading Mentors, Jackson Heights Middle School

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As we enter another year of our Reading Mentors program at Jackson Heights, we've had seven years to plant seeds, fertilize the crops and witness what fruit can be harvested from mentoring relationships between adults and middle school students in the area of reading.

Reading Mentors is volunteer program that pairs struggling readers with caring adult volunteers who assist them with reading exercises to increase fluency and encourage them to read for fun. While this program is part of the Seminole County Public Schools Dividends program, it is unique in that it is only available at Jackson Heights Middle School.

We've seen the majority of our students show significant improvement in testing scores every year, one student went from a score of '1' to a '4' on the FCAT reading, and one of our original students is now attending Seminole State College and proud of his success!

Students and volunteers meet together at Jackson Heights for 30-minute sessions before school begins, usually once or twice a week. They read together for a half hour of one-on-one attention and encouragement. These young readers gain self-confidence, new skills and vocabulary and see their grades and attendance improve. The volunteer mentors gain a chance to make a real difference in a child's life as they encourage the literacy that can mean success in school and beyond.

The critical literacy skills encouraged by the reading mentors at school can also be practiced at home by parents. We urge parents to create an environment to stimulate reading by following some of these suggestions:

- Set aside time to read at home just as the reading mentors do in the half hour before school.
- Talk about the books you are reading, ask questions about the content and have your kids try to "stump the parent" with their own questions about the book.
- Purchase books and magazine subscriptions that are in your child's area of interest. You may not like comics or teen romance books but reading needs to be fun to be done.
- Get your child a library card and make regular visits to check out books with them.
- Use the smart phones and e-readers as a high tech lure to new vocabulary and research.

The student struggling to read needs the help and encouragement of both parents and reading mentors. If you have just a half hour a week to share and would like to become a reading mentor or to start a reading mentor program at your school, please call me at 407-492-3212.

I'm Connie O'Hanlon and reading with children matters.