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Entering A New School Year With A Better Outlook On Reading

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Most children go through some peaks and valleys when they are first learning to read. But for some students, the task is so difficult it literally reduces them to tears.

Enter the READ Foundation, a Manhattan-based reading tutorial program that employs high school students to help their younger peers get caught up on the basics of reading. The program just completed its first sessions in Queens, where about 60 students graduated from the five-week course.

Citywide, approximately 325 at-risk elementary school students graduated from the program this summer. The children read a combined 10,000 books as part of the program, with the students in Queens reading about 1,000 combined.

"When the parents learn how many books their children have read, you often hear these gasps from them," said Anne Adler, president of the READ Foundation.

Although summer is not considered the ideal season to get students thinking about school, much less inside a classroom to go through reading tutorial lessons, attendance throughout the city for the program was 95 percent.

"The kids love the reading," Adler said. "If the program doesn't happen one day because it's a holiday or something, they are bummed out."

The READ Foundation—the name stands for Reading Excellence and Discovery Foundation—employs teen tutors from the 9th to 12th grades to teach their younger peers. In kindergarten to 8th-grade schools, the tutors could be 7th and 8th graders.



Thirty students graduated last Thursday from a reading tutorial program held at PS 212 in Jackson Heights.

(photo by Michael O'Kane)

The sessions in Queens were held at PS 212 in Jackson Heights. Students from two other schools in the surrounding area also attended the session.

The students are chosen based on the recommendation of teachers, along with data assessment conducted by READ Foundation officials. All students entered in the tutorial program have shown a need for improvement in reading.

The goal of the program, which was established in 2000 to target struggling 3rd graders, is to have the students reading at one full grade level higher. The New York City Department of Education

released a report last year that found more than 65 percent of African-American and Hispanic students in 3rd to 8th grades—excluding 7th grade, which lacked data—performed below grade level in reading and writing.

"The program is not about having the tutors or their parents read to them, it's about the children being given the building blocks to become independent readers," Adler said.

It is too early to evaluate the success rate of the first READ program in Queens, but Adler indicated that initial feedback has been extremely encouraging.

"It's been very positive," she said. "I expect that we'll have more schools in Queens this fall."

The schools have to commit to the program, which means setting aside money in its budget to offer the tutorial sessions. During the regular academic year, the program is held a minimum of 13 weeks after school, four days a week.

The READ Foundation will be set up in 24 schools throughout the five boroughs, with 13 already confirmed. Adler is asking middle school and high school principals to contact the organization through its web site, www.readnyc.org, about hosting the program at their schools.

Adler believes the struggles that many students face with reading can be blamed on a variety of factors, but the lack of one-on-one tutorial help is a significant one. She notes that in most classrooms, there is one teacher for every 25 students.

"These kids need individual help and training, but that's a luxury that you can't find in most classrooms," Adler said. "Most homes don't even have that luxury."

The use of teen tutors has proven successful for the READ Foundation. Approximately 180 students were employed this summer as reading teachers.

The tutors had to go through a training session to learn how to become teachers. They must maintain good grades and have good behavioral reports.

"The children see these teens as peers, as academic role models," Adler said. "That is something that just helps motivate the child."

For more information about the READ Foundation, visit www.readnyc.com.