



Okaloosa County School District
Best in Florida

Viking Leaders Read to Head Start Pre-Schoolers

Wednesday, September 02, 2009



Head Start preschoolers in Fort Walton Beach got a special treat when D.J. Howard (pictured) and other members of the Fort Walton Beach HS Student Council came to read to them.



Meghan Szatkowski adeptly draws a young student into the story by asking him questions about what they are reading.



Mia Rodgers uses dramatic expression to make the story exciting. Some of the young students were shy, yet they seemed to enjoy the reading sessions and asked if the older students were going to return.



"The reading's not hard, but getting their attention is hard, whether they're four or fourteen," said senior Justin Moore.



Destinee Wilson and the other teens developed instant rapport with the young students.



Erica Gary explained some of the tough vocabulary words to help the preschoolers comprehend the story.



After reading four or five books, LaDrake Bell helps the preschoolers complete their puzzles.



Playing with puzzles helps children with geometry and reasoning skills. Tae Kang lets one of the young students think for a minute before deciding where to place the puzzle piece.



Student Council sponsor Elyse Cagan-Stafford is an Intensive Reading teacher at the high school.



Chelsea Parker and the other Student Council members will return twice a month to read to the preschoolers. Both the younger and the older students enjoyed their time together.

There was a moment of hesitation as they looked around the room, but within a few minutes, the Fort Walton Beach HS Student Council members had found a stack of books, paired up with a preschooler and settled into the tiny chairs for story time.

The preschoolers take part in the state funded Voluntary Pre-kindergarten (VPK) program at Head Start in Fort Walton Beach. The goal of the program is to ensure disadvantaged children are prepared for success in school.

The teenagers read aloud in dramatic voices with good facial expressions, drawing the little ones into the stories they read. More remarkable than their reading talent was the speed at which they established rapport with the preschoolers they had just met. One little girl who was too shy to join a group of her classmates opened up to an older student and remained with her throughout the session, which lasted about 40 minutes.

'You'll be really smart!'

When one of the little boys declared: "I don't want to read another book," senior Justin Moore answered him like a seasoned big brother: "But you know what they say about reading young? You'll be really smart. You can become an astronaut or a doctor!"

Then he accompanied the boy to the book table and found a new table to sit in, right in the midst of a pint-sized "grocery store." After he and another teen had read a few more stories to the preschooler, they took out the plastic cash registers and played with the scanners.

In the room next door, another group of Student Council members had finished reading and were helping their young charges complete puzzles.

"I have brothers and sisters at home, but to reach out to others is amazing," said senior LaDrake Bell. "It's a great feeling."

Kyle English enjoyed reading to the little girl he was paired with. "She was excited and she asked, 'Are you coming again?'"

Mary Wood, vice-president of the Student Council, was equally glad about the time she spent with her preschooler. "She really likes to read," said Wood. "She's so cute - I got a hug."

According to Student Council sponsor Elyse Cagan-Stafford, the students will return twice a month, except for October, when they will be busy preparing Homecoming activities.

Cagan-Stafford, who teaches Intensive Reading at the high school, decided to have the Council members read to the Head Start students when she heard about the district's push to help disadvantaged students and minorities close the achievement gap.

"If they start getting help in high school, it's too little, too late," she explained, adding that she was "extremely happy" with the way her students interacted with the younger children. "They're our future."