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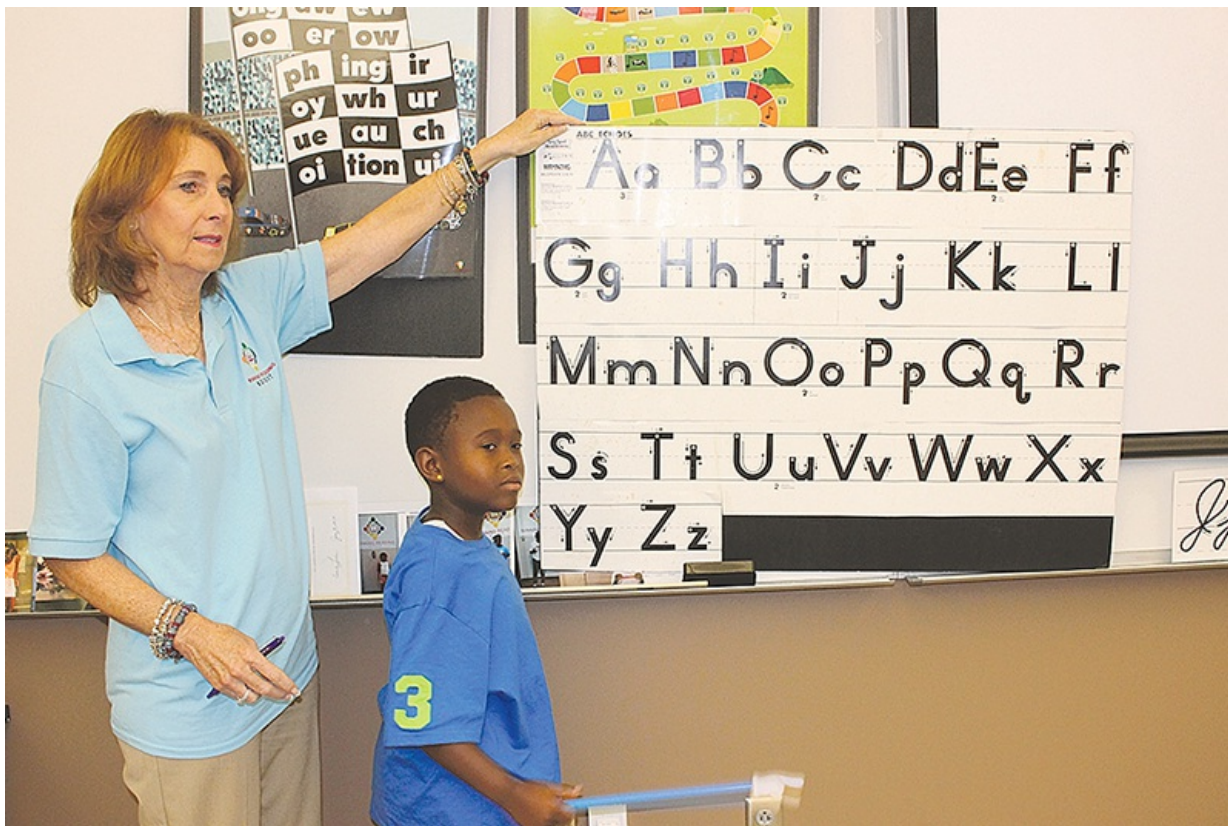
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Back-to-School Featured

Winning Reading Boost

August 10, 2017

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BY FRANK DROUZAS, Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG – Kids don’t typically rate learning over the summer as an activity on par with riding bikes or hitting the beach, but thanks to the Winning Reading Boost program, many area youngsters have improved their reading skills and have had great fun doing it.



The program was brought to Pinellas County from the University of Florida in response to the “failure factories” articles that shed light on several underachieving elementary schools in south St. Pete, explained Dianne Fix, a Winning Reading Boost coordinator.

Winning Reading Boost is a 90-day intervention reading program designed to enable students struggling with reading to become fluent and successful readers. Fix said that it was specifically designed to be a “different approach,” one that is fun for students.

“It uses songs and it uses games to reinforce the skills that we want the kids to have,” said Fix, a retired elementary school teacher.

The program progresses in a sequence, so the students are never expected to apply anything that they haven’t already been taught, Fix noted, adding that the program has been in use at area schools such as Lakewood, Melrose, Fairmount Park and Midtown Academy.

Community organizations such as the Pinellas County Urban League and the Jordan Park housing complex are also doing their part by giving the children the opportunity to excel in reading over the summer. They partnered with the Police Athletic League of St. Pete and transported the kids to various locations where they could take part in Winning Reading Boost before the school year officially began.

The program is 36 steps long, and it is the same number of steps whether it is done in the summer or over the school year. Once the students go through the entire program, Fix stated, they can read any word by breaking it apart and sounding it out.

“It’s an approach that they don’t always get in the schools,” she said. “There is no memorization of words; the parents don’t have to give them flash cards. They can sound out any word.”

Due to lack of funding and budget cuts, Winning Reading Boost will not be at any of the Pinellas County schools for the upcoming year, but the program is currently looking at churches or community centers as possible locations to continue to help kids with their reading.

“We are hoping to build on this success that we’ve experienced,” Fix asserted, “and I don’t think it will stop because I think

there's enough of an interest and enough success that eventually it will be picked up by another outside funding source."

Sue Dickson, author of Winning Reading Boost, has been writing programs for schools since 1972. She had a younger brother who struggled with reading, she recalled, and this made her determined to find a way to "where everybody could get it."

"I had a minor in music," Dickson explained. "I played the guitar, ukulele, piano and I sang with the kids all the time, and I noticed that if they learned it in song, they had it for life!"

Dickson was working with the Lastinger Center at the University of Florida when the "failure factories" articles appeared.

"We realized, immediately, that we needed to help right here," she said, adding that she wrote special programs for children here in the third, fourth and fifth grade who were behind on their reading skills.

She believes that too few schools are looking into programs that are research-based and maintains it is "criminal" to employ reading methods and programs that are new but not proven.

Kristen Katzel, a coach for Winning Reading Boost and also a teacher, is new to the program and enthusiastic about its positive effects on the students. She said the program stresses the foundations of reading that the children have either forgotten or were never really taught.

"You can sit down with kids and they look at the alphabet and they're just so used to [singing] A, B, C, D, E, F, G, but okay, let's really get down to the nuts and bolts of it," Katzel said. "Do you know the sounds that 'A' makes? 'A' makes a few different sounds. Every vowel in the alphabet makes two different sounds, long and short."

Katzel affirms that the skills of all the children she has worked with in the Winning Reading Boost program have noticeably improved, in pronunciation and comprehension.

"I would say across the board they've all made gains," she said.

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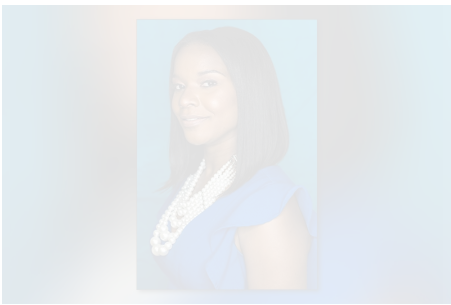
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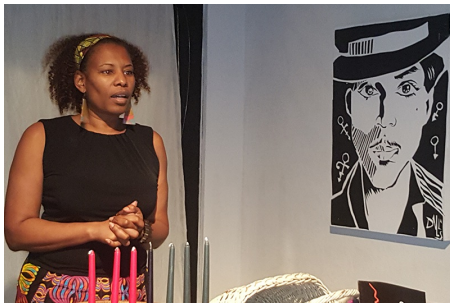
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