



commentary



The writing on the wall Volunteer tutors critical to offset school budget cuts

by Becca Loli

Concern about looming state budget cuts has many public schools brainstorming ways to do more with less. In January, Superintendent Tony Baldwin of the Buncombe County Schools posted on his blog, "The significant loss of human resources, including classroom teachers, appears inevitable." And the budget approved May 4 by the Statehouse in Raleigh seems to bear out that assessment.

Proposed cuts would eliminate state funding for teachers' assistants in the second and third grades, as well as "eliminate funds for student diagnostics, a key tool for teachers to address student learning problems as soon as they arise," according to an April 13 news release from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

Meanwhile, North Carolina students have pressing needs. More than 70 percent of eighth-grade public-school students in the state read below grade level, and more than 30 percent of ninth-graders won't graduate in four years, according to *The State of America's Children*

"It almost brought us to tears to watch one student sitting on the edge of his seat, fully engrossed in the task at hand," says Julie Thomas, a former second-grade teacher who took the training last year. "It was like you could see the light bulbs going on in his head. You could almost read his thoughts: 'I'm reading! I'm reading! I can do this!'"

Reading skills are an important predictor of a child's future success. "The fact is that the low-income fourth-graders who cannot meet the [proficiency] level in reading today are all too likely to become our nation's lowest-income, least-skilled, least-productive and most costly citizens tomorrow" notes a report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, titled *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*.

The Augustine Project's tutor training includes 70 hours of classroom instruction and hands-on practice teaching, supervised by an experienced Orton-Gillingham tutor and/or certified academic language therapist. Trainees learn how to assess and remediate students' phonemic-awareness skills,

getstarted

Prospective tutors must attend an orientation session before signing up for the training. The next orientation is slated for Monday, May 23, from 4:30 to 6 p.m. at the Literacy Council offices in downtown Asheville. A second one will be held Monday, June 6, at the same time and place. The actual tutor-training course will be offered at Evergreen Community Charter School in east Asheville July 18-22 and 25-29, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily. An additional training is planned for October.

To learn more about becoming a tutor and taking the summer 2011 Augustine Project tutor-training class or to reserve a space in an upcoming orientation, call 254-3442, ext. 204, or email literacytutors@litcouncil.com.



When children struggle with reading and writing, they often feel ashamed of their own brains; they lose confidence in their ability to learn.

2010, a report published by the Children's Defense Fund. And the dropout rates for both the Asheville City (4.8 percent) and Buncombe County Schools (4.65 percent) are above the state average.

Against that backdrop, we must rely more on volunteers to support at-risk students in our community. To that end, the Asheville Augustine Project is recruiting and training volunteers to reach young students who are struggling with reading, spelling or writing skills, and whose families (and perhaps schools) can't afford to pay for one-on-one tutoring. The Literacy Council of Buncombe County launched the local program last year in hopes of reaching these struggling readers before they drop out of school; with generous funding from the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, we were able to train our first group of tutors in 2010.

Every tutor we train is equipped with the tools and potential to make a real difference in the life of a student. When children struggle with reading and writing, they often feel ashamed of their own brains; they lose confidence in their ability to learn. But when they start seeing themselves being successful, it can really turn things around.

phonics, word-attack skills, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling and writing.

"I learned more about teaching reading during the two-week Augustine Project training than I did in the semester-long 'Teaching Reading' course that I took in college," says volunteer tutor Ruth Christie. "I wish that all school districts included a program like this for their students who haven't been able to learn to read using other approaches."

In exchange for the training and materials, volunteers agree to work with a low-income student in Western North Carolina who is reading or writing below grade level. Tutors will provide at least 60 pro bono lessons, giving students one-on-one attention and instruction that's specifically targeted to their individual language-learning needs. Working together, we can help ensure that our at-risk students get the help they need to succeed. X

Asheville resident Becca Loli is director of the Literacy Council of Buncombe County's Augustine Project.