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A little practice helps put words in kids' mouths

Language for Scholars program helps them increase their vocabularies while having fun [Chicago Final Edition]

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CHICAGO TRIBUNE HOLIDAY GIVING: CHARITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

At 10 years old, Tyshawn Crockrell may still be little. But, thanks to a literacy program in the Cabrini neighborhood, he's thinking big.

A 4th grader at Manierre Elementary School on the Near West Side, Tyshawn was struggling with reading when he was referred to the Language for Scholars program by his school in 2003.

Two years later, he's hungry to play a major speaking role in his class play, "Little Red Riding Hood."

"I want to be that one," Tyshawn said one recent afternoon, referring to the role of the narrator. "But she said that has too many words."

But with continued effort in the Language for Scholars program, run by Chicago nonprofit Leap Learning Systems, Tyshawn hopes to soon find no amount of words too many and no speaking role too big.

Leap Learning Systems is one of the Chicago-area organizations supported by Chicago Tribune Holiday Giving campaign of Chicago Tribune Charities, a McCormick Tribune Foundation fund.

Working in partnership with the Kids Club in Cabrini-Green, Leap offers Language for Scholars to inner-city children between 4th and 6th grades. Most of the students involved scored below average on literacy tests at their Chicago Public Schools and were referred to the program by their teachers and principals, says Leap Learning Systems program director Juliane Culver.

Since Language for Scholars began five years ago, organizers and students say it has been a hit.

"It's fun," Tyshawn said. "We work on homework for an hour, and they help us."

Each Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoon during the school year, about 140 neighborhood children gather at the Kids Club building in the 400 block of West Oak Street. Inside the two-story brick structure, they take part in a variety of after-school programs that range from dance to chorus to photography.

In 2000, Kids Club officials recognized that an academic component was missing from its after-school program and decided to contact Leap Learning Systems for advice and guidance. The Language for Scholars program was the end result.

"A lot of kids were really struggling with reading, and there was definitely a vocabulary gap," Culver said. "In inner city, a lot of kids just aren't exposed to some words. You and I may take them for granted, but I've never told you what a blizzard is."

To bridge the vocabulary gap and help students develop speaking fluency, reading comprehension and language skills, Leap instructors encourage them to consider how to use words as "tools" for reading and thinking, Culver said. The stated philosophy behind Language for Scholars is, "If you can speak and communicate effectively, you have the tools necessary to achieve your life's goals."

"And on top of it, we try to make it fun," Culver said.

Each year, Leap officials scour the state curriculum standards to select common vocabulary themes that everyone should be familiar with, such as the government, the human body and nutrition. Students spend time learning the definitions and proper use of words related to the themes.

At the end of each week, each class splits into teams and takes part in a spirited game similar to Jeopardy! in which the answers are vocabulary words related to the month's theme.

"The kids really get into it," Culver said. "It's fun to watch."

Recently, "weather" was the theme when Language for Scholars team leader Katie Gohde, 25, played on the TV show host Alex Trebek for her class of eager 10- and 11-year-olds.

"OK, 'Vocabulary' for \$500," Gohde said. "What is a person who studies the earth's climate, atmosphere and weather?"

"Archeologist?" one boy offered.

"No, it's meteorologist!" shouted Jabraun Hill, 11, clearly excited and proud that he had added the word to his vocabulary.

Results like that, Culver said, are what Language for Scholars is all about.

"Kids can enter the program and really be struggling with school," she said. "But with the right attention from a whole person, they really can turn things around and stop struggling in school."

"It takes time and a lot of patience and a lot of hard work. But the kids gain a lot of confidence, become confident and laughs at anyone and everyone claps and chants for each other. It's really like family."

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[Illustration]

PHOTO GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTO: Brionte Booker, 10 (left), celebrates her team's win in the weekly "Jeopardy!" competition of the Language for Scholars program at the Kids Club in Cabrini-Green. Terrence Antonio James. GRAPHIC: CHICAGO TRIBUNE HOLIDAY GIVING CHICAGOLAND'S C
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PHOTO Brionte Booker, 10 (left), celebrates her team's win in the weekly "Jeopardy!" competition (for Scholars program at the Kids Club in Cabrini-Green. GRAPHIC: CHICAGO TRIBUNE HOLIDAY CHICAGOLAND'S GIFT The first \$2.1 million of donations are matched 50 cents on the dollar by th Tribune Foundation. Chicago Tribune and McCormick Tribune Foundation pay all administrative co Tribune Holiday Giving is a campaign of Chicago Tribune Charities, a McCormick Tribune Foundat gift is tax deductible as permitted by law. To make a donation by credit card, call 1-800-422-2850 o www.chicagotribune.com/holidaygiving. Or mail this coupon and your donation to: Chicago Tribune P.O. Box 5120, Chicago, IL 60680- 5120 - - - Enclosed is a donation for \$ ----- Make checks payab Tribune Holiday Giving. (Please print clearly) Name ----- Address ----- ----- State/Zip ----- Day Phone ----- E-mail ----- names will be added weekly to listings on www.chicagotribune.com/holidaygiving Other Donor Ack Options: This gift is (please choose one) () in honor of: () in memory of: () Please do not publish r Holiday Giving Donor Acknowledgment Listings (in the newspaper or online). All donations are ack mail. Best efforts will be made to publish donor names in the Chicago Tribune for gifts of \$25 or mc prior to December 15, 2005.

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