

House Committee On Education

HB 2801

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Chair Doherty and Members of the Committee:

My Experience as a Mentor

My name is Peter H. Reader. I'm a volunteer mentor with Metropolitan Family Service's Experience Corps program. I've been at Davis Elementary for five years. Davis is a K-5 school located in a low income neighborhood in Gresham, Oregon. All of its students are on the free lunch program. For too many of them, it's the one good meal a day they get.

Many of the boys and girls attending Davis come from single parent households. There is significant gang activity in the area served by the school. Some of the children's family members are in prison. Others have been shot, even murdered. For them, school is their secure place, their teachers are their guardians, their mentors are their role models.

The majority of Davis' student body is Latino. The remainder is composed of newly arrived youngsters from the Pacific Islands, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, India, Myanmar, Iraq, Congo, Eritrea, Cuba and Somalia, along with a smattering of local

African-American and Caucasian kids. It's not unusual to hear Swahili, Arabic, and Burmese spoken in the halls of Davis. Many of its students have been brought up in refugee camps in Africa and Asia. Some are the victims of tribal warfare. A few still carry the trauma of losing parents, relatives and loved ones. Yet in spite of this, they are cheerful, eager to learn, and a joy to be with.

Through no fault of their own, many of the parents of Davis' kids speak little or no English. They cannot help their children with homework, or read to them. What's more, teachers at Davis have as many as twenty-five or thirty students in their classes. So individual attention is hard to come by. That's where we come in: Intergenerational Mentors. There are five of us at Davis, about fifty throughout other schools in the Portland area. We get to spend at least an hour a week -- one-on-one or in small groups of two or three -- with children selected by their teachers. The kids read to us. We read to them and with them. We help with math. And sometimes, we just talk. Small talk: About what they want to be. What they did over the weekend. Big talk: The importance of staying in school. Finishing high school. Graduating from college. It may be the only encouragement they get.

In the course of our connections with children of the highest need, amazing things happen. Eyes brighten. Light bulbs go off. We mentors share the thrill our kids get from learning how to sound out a word in English. We feel the pride they show in reading a sentence or paragraph or story well -- with expression and comprehension.

We witness those exciting moments when multiplication finally makes sense, and long division is mastered.. And, I must say, we bask in their delight.

I know for a fact that mentoring works. Teachers tell me that individual reading and math scores show improvement, sometimes dramatic improvement. They tell me of slow learners blossoming into scholars. They tell me about how important our support is to them.

I was never a teacher. I have no kids of my own. So when I started with Experience Corps I needed all the help I could get. I got that help. And still get it. We have monthly group meetings where experts train us in the finer points of teaching, motivating, and dealing with children. And at these sessions I also hear from other, more experienced mentors than me, about practical solutions to everyday problems I'm faced with. Additionally, each month we five Davis mentors get together with our team leader and a representative from Metropolitan Family Service to discuss specific items of interest at our school and with our kids. All of this training has made me a better mentor.

And being a better mentor has made me a better person. There's not much I can do to change the world. Or the Country. Or the State. Or even my City. But I can change the life of a kid. For the better. And not only me. All the mentors I've met through Experience Corps have told me stories of children that have been helped by the program.

There's an old Hebrew proverb: "Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." That about sums up Metropolitan Family Service's Experience Corps for me.