


Schools need tutors

Education group says 100 students could use some help

by [Andre A. Rodriguez](#), ARODRIGUEZ@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM
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Karen Kropp has been tutoring students for the past four years and says the process gets her emotionally invested in the students. She has been meeting with Jones Elementary fifth grader Tarica Lordman, 10, twice a week along with six other students.
8/22/07 - Erin Brethauer
(ebrethau@citizen-times.com)
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ASHEVILLE — Area schools and organizations have put out a call for people to volunteer as tutors for local school children.

Leading the charge is the Asheville-Buncombe Education Coalition, a partnership of more than 20 public and private organizations, universities and school districts. The coalition last year provided 142 mentors and tutors to work with 393 students in Asheville City and Buncombe County schools, said Elisabeth Bocklet, marketing coordinator of the coalition.

"We probably need a combination of tutors and mentors for about 100 students for the coming year," she said. "We typically have about 100 to 150 students who need to be served. There's definitely a significant need."

Tutors can work with one student or several, as does Karen Kropp who is beginning her fourth year of tutoring elementary school students.

"I've had some of the same kids for that whole time," said Kropp, who is tutoring seven students and has tutored as many as 11. "It's nice to see them grow and change and get better. I just like being with the kids."

It's not all growth and success, she said, and it's not always about academics.

"There's a lot of personal interaction, talking about their families and what they've done over the summer or over the weekend," she said. "The academic part is easy. It's just trying to get through to them and trying to get them interested is a major challenge."

Asheville City Schools Foundation had 34 tutors put in 1,650 hours last school year serving 73 students, said Linda Wells, the foundation's tutor coordinator. Buncombe County Schools estimates that 25 percent of its students receive tutoring, spokesman Stan Alleyne said.

"It varies according to what the principal and teacher decide is appropriate for that student," he said.

Getting started

The first step to becoming a tutor is the application. Prospective tutors are asked to provide background information and information on when and where they can serve. The more flexible a person can be the better.

Potential tutors also must undergo criminal background checks, including searches of sex offender registries. If everything checks out the person can be matched with a waiting student. The process can take a few weeks, Bocklet said.

"Where it gets hung up is if a person can only work at a particular location or day, then it can take longer," she said. "Usually for most people they're pretty flexible. They want to go where the need is and it usually works out pretty well."

Tutors receive training, which often includes cultural sensitivity training where tutors learn how students' cultural and economic backgrounds might affect learning. They also will learn how to build a relationship with a student, teach planning and organizational skills, and how to address grade-level issues.

The Education Coalition also conducts monthly tutor-mentor support nights where volunteers get together, share experiences and learn from each other.

"Peer support is very important. We have people who have been doing this for several years and can provide support," she said.

Tutors as mentors

More often than not, tutors take on more responsibilities than helping a student with reading or algebra. The Asheville-Buncombe Education Coalition recruits tutors and mentors and used to hold separate training for each, but beginning this year the two groups will receive combined training.

"The truth is that all of our people out there are mentoring and tutoring," Bocklet said. "They both do a little bit of each."

It's important for tutors to build relationships with their students to gain their trust and to find out about things in their lives that might get in the way of learning, said the Rev. L.C. Ray, co-founder and president of One Youth at a Time, an Education Coalition member organization.

"We at One Youth at a Time really take tutoring and mentoring very seriously," he said. "These young people are coming from various homes and backgrounds. We have to be there where some of these children are."

"If some of these other kinds of concerns are not met, naturally the school learning is going to be slow. We see fair results if some children are better focused, they are able to handle circumstances better, and we feel that can reflect on their learning."