



Valuable hours in the afternoon

Homework: An after-school program at an apartment community helps youngsters with reading, math and computers -- and seeks more adult volunteers.

By Joy Green
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In a once-blighted housing project in Annapolis, a transformation is slowly taking place, with an after school literacy program playing what community leaders consider a crucial role.

The apartment complex formerly known as Boston Heights—once described by local police as a “war zone”—has been renovated in recent years. Now called Admiral Oaks, it is home to an onsite community service center known as The Gateway.

Among the best-attended programs at the center is the 3-year- old Homework Club, offered in conjunction with the Anne Arundel County Literacy Council. Kids from first through eighth grades gather after school in a small room in Building 430 at Admiral Oaks to do their homework, improve reading skills and play on computers.

“It’s very important that they have a safe place to come after school, ll said Kara Callahan, program coordinator for The Gateway.

“The children who attend the program every day after school learn the skills they need through working on the computers, and the tutors that work with them really help to improve their academic skills, ll she said. ‘It really does help them stay in school and encourage them to do well and continue.”

The Homework Club meets from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and draws about 30 children a day. Some attend every day the center is open.

Shyneira Smith, 9, a fourth-grader at Rolling Knolls Elementary School in Annapolis, said she likes the activities and services at the Homework Club, including the computers. “It’s fun. I’ve been coming since second grade, ll said Shyneira.

Children are allowed to use the 10 computers, each with Internet access and educational games, after they’ve finished their homework.

Lakeshia Wallace, also 9 and a fourth-grader at Rolling Knolls Elementary, said that the educational computer games help improve her reading skills.

Lakeshia, whose favorite books include the Amelia Bedelia series by Peggy Parish, said, "If I don't know how to play a game, I have to read the directions."

The children in the Homework Club are excited about the "Dinner and a Book" program scheduled to begin next month.

Originally called "Reading Night," the program was started as a family reading activity. But Kathie Cronin, volunteer coordinator at The Gateway, said organizers decided to refocus the program on children this year.

Volunteers will provide the children with a home-cooked meal, which will be used to help teach nutrition, Cronin said. After dinner, the children will read with tutors and in small groups based on reading level.

The Dinner and a Book program will be funded through a \$7,500 matching grant, half from the Local Management Board of Anne Arundel County and half from the Literacy Council.

Callahan said that some of the funds will be used to hire a part-time reading specialist who will help develop the appropriate curriculum for each reading level.

Another fourth-grader from Rolling Knolls, Liza Ramirez, 9, said she was happy to sign up for Dinner and a Book, and is an avid participant in the Homework Club. "We learn a lot of things, and we do our homework and we do other activities," said Liza, who attends with her twin sister, Elizabeth.

One of the biggest challenges for the Homework Club and the Dinner and a Book program is finding volunteers, said Callahan. With 32 children enrolled, Callahan acknowledges that the Homework Club is quite crowded sometimes. Another room is available, but the program does not have enough staff to operate it.

Last school year, service-learning students from Anne Arundel County Community College helped with the program, and Callahan said that a few volunteers are from the Anne Arundel County Literacy Council.

Iona Thorn, 76, of Pasadena, has been volunteering with the program since it began. Although she used to volunteer to help adults with literacy issues, Thorn said she feels it is important for her to work with children before they become adults with reading problems.

"I decided that I want to be a part of the prevention," she said.

Callahan said that Rolling Knolls Elementary, the school most of the children attend, is committed to helping the Homework Club. She meets with its principal at least once a month, and said its

Parent Teacher Association also is supportive, with some members volunteering to give rides to parents of Homework Club participants to conferences and other school events.

Callahan said The Gateway will be developing literacy programs for adults in the future. The center has a small library with titles for adults and children, and while Callahan would like to see more programs, she and others are happy with the difference their efforts are making in the community.

“We're trying to create a generation of readers, and we're being successful here,” said Thorn.

“We see a difference. “

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