

## **Reading Team: Keeping Harlem's children on top**

By STEPHON JOHNSON Amsterdam News Staff | Posted: Monday, April 23, 2012 12:00 am

While many of Harlem's children were busy resting after taking the New York State English Language Arts Exam, others could be found at 2090 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd., refining their literacy skills with the Reading Team.

The Reading Team is a nonprofit organization that works exclusively in Central Harlem and assists children who are at high risk for reading failure.

Setting their schedule to align with the school year—late summer and early fall to late spring and early summer—the Reading Team engages children in several different ways to not only improve their literacy, but help them excel as well. Through literary focus, early intervention, small group gatherings and computer-based learning, the children are able to improve their reading skills through the kind of one-on-one learning they might not get in the classroom or at home.

Through pre-school programs for pre-kindergarten students, to after-school and parent programs for kindergarten through fifth grade students, the Reading Team takes on each aspect of a child's life that could be beneficial or detrimental, depending on the environment, and makes sure it's the former. David Marion, spokesperson for the Reading Team, took the AmNews on a tour of its facilities and talked about the nonprofit's goals and aspirations.

"The mission of the Reading Team is to help children at high risk of reading failure," Marion told the AmNews. "Our mission is to help kids who might not otherwise have the access to improve literacy skills. They might not have books in the home so they didn't get the kind of fundamentals they should get to be ready to learn. It's a function of disadvantaged families not having either the time, resources or know-how to make sure their children are getting exposed to reading and writing at home."

"The after-school kids come to us from elementary schools and are recommended by teachers because they're way behind and some have behavioral problems," continued Marion.

How can behavioral problems play a role in literacy skills? It's actually the other way around. Literacy skills can play a role in a child's behavioral problems.

"If a teacher tells the kid to crisscross his legs or line up in place and the kid doesn't understand the vocabulary—they don't know what those words mean—they might get frustrated and act out because they don't feel like they're part of the group," Marion said. "Kids don't know exactly why they're acting out, but we know. It's not linked to emotional issues."

The Reading Team started its operations October 2001, and the nonprofit said they have produced many success stories of kids taking what they've learned with them and going on to college. Marion spoke of people in their late teens coming back to help children currently in the

program. Volunteer teachers and reading specialists are there for the children and sometimes stay longer than expected to help them with problems. Considering that many public schools don't have the time to take a kid aside and go through remedial training with them, the Reading Team is a much-needed commodity.

"Once a kid gets into second, third or fourth grade, schools don't have the resources to do remedial training," said Marion. "Classes are large. In third grade, vocabulary needs to double and they need to decode words at a faster rate. If they don't have the word analysis or phonetic skills corrected soon, it could hurt them later on in their lives. Third grade is usually where the gap begins."

The after-school kids come in between 3:30 and 4 p.m. and are offered snacks and help with any homework that might require literacy skills. Afterward, they get to work and are divided by groups according to grade and engage in 90-minute exercises, which, depending on the day, could involve general reading, text analysis or writing. They also spend time in the Waterford Computer Room, a high-tech learning tool used to help kids with letters, numbers and punctuation.

With the rising immigrant population in Central Harlem, the Reading Team also helps those who don't know English very well learn the language. No wonder so many parents want their children in the program.

"Our waiting lists are off the Richter scale they are so long," said Marion. "I think the teachers [and parents] in Harlem are well aware of the issues, and that's why they recommend students to us."

With plans to add an East Harlem or West Harlem location, the Reading Team is serving its constituents with an important need.

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