

GOTHAM SCHOOLS

Middle school students trade TV for tutoring to boost reading

by Patrick Wall
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Tutor Aaron Whidbee with sixth-graders Elijah Parrilla (left) and Manuelle Lamboy, who attend a new extended-day tutoring program at the Highbridge Green School.

It was nearly 5 p.m. on a recent chilly November afternoon — in other words, a time of television, text messages, and snacks for most middle-school students.

And yet four sixth-graders at the Highbridge Green School in the Bronx were scouring a young-adult novel, “The Skin I’m In,” for clues about the way writers develop their characters.

“I would like to add on to what Manuelle said,” said Elijah Parrilla, waiting for a nod from his after-school literacy tutor. “It says, ‘Good writers get close to their characters.’”

The tutor, Aaron Whidbee, a former teacher from Yonkers, then asked another question about the chapter, and another student found the right answer. “You guys know what you’re doing here,” Whidbee said.

Highbridge is one of 20 district middle schools in a pilot program run by the city and private partners that extends the schools’ days by two-and-a-half hours — including an hour of small-group literacy tutoring for some students — in the hopes of raising students’ often alarmingly low reading skills. At Highbridge, for instance, 83 percent of sixth-graders read below grade level when they started the year.

“This is a huge opportunity,” said Kyle Brillante, principal of the new middle school, whose goal is to propel students ahead two grade levels this year. “It’s something we have to do.”

The roughly 2,000 sixth-graders in the pilot schools who stay late each day get a meal, an hour of academics and an hour of hands-on activities, including yoga, Salsa dancing, martial arts, robotics, and filmmaking run by nonprofits such as Citizen Schools, City Year and WHEDco.

Mid-level readers, who can decipher words but struggle to make sense of whole texts, spend their academic hour in four-student reading groups led by paid tutors. Other students get help in different subjects.

The three-year, \$20 million pilot, known as Middle School ExTRA, began in September. It builds off of the city’s two-year-old Middle School Quality Initiative, which aims to boost literacy in schools in the bottom third of the district, where reading scores chronically trail those in math. The 20 extended-day pilot schools were randomly selected from the 89 now in the middle-school program.

To a degree, the longer-day-plus-tutoring pilot began in Houston.

There, in 2010, Harvard University’s EdLabs helped guide the local school district as it tried to turn around nine of its lowest-performing schools. One striking outcome was that sixth- and ninth-graders in those schools who spent an hour each day in “high-dosage” math tutoring — small-group instruction several days a week — improved as much as if they’d had an extra four to six months of schooling.

Back in New York, a nonprofit called The After-School Corporation had found that in a 2011 model program that paired schools with community groups to add three hours to each school day, students’ state-exam math scores grew at twice the citywide rate.

The groups wondered what would happen if they combined their models, but trained their sights on literacy instead of math. They approached the city’s Department of Education with the proposal and an enticement — \$10 million raised by the Robin Hood Foundation from several groups.

The department, which had failed to find a school to use as a literacy model for its middle-school initiative, agreed to partner with the groups and — with the City Council — to match their funding. EdLabs will compare the reading gains of students in the pilot schools to other middle-school students to measure the tutoring’s impact.

“If it works, this is a powerhouse intervention,” said Michael Weinstein, the Robin Hood Foundation’s chief program officer, who noted that schools could adopt the intensive tutoring without major structural changes. “We’ll see.”

The literacy tutoring resembles guided-reading groups, where the tutors suggest ideas to consider while reading, the students read silently while the tutor holds one-on-one conversations, then the group reconvenes to talk about the text.

The tutor guides are highly scripted, with paragraph-by-paragraph questions for each book, since just over half of the tutors have a background in teaching or mentoring. Many of the tutors are retirees and all are college graduates.



Tutor Deborah King with Highbridge student Miosoti Mejia Rodriguez.

But even with the guides, it’s possible for tutors to veer off-script or face unexpected student queries — as when a Highbridge student stumped her tutor by asking what “forage” meant. TASC has tried to keep instruction quality high through ongoing training and site managers to support the tutors.

Another early concern was attendance — would students willingly stay in school until as late as 6 p.m.?

After a bumpy start at some schools, several principals said they have achieved near-perfect attendance by pitching the program as an extension of the school day — “periods 9 and 10,” as several schools put it — not an after-school program.

“It’s not an option,” said Dwight Chase, principal of I.S. 109 in Brooklyn, where sixth-graders now leave at 4:50 p.m., instead of 2:20 p.m. like the other students. “This is the school day.”

Some principals praised TASC’s extended-day model, where the nonprofits that run the extra-hours sessions work closely with the principals to align the school-day and after-school instruction.

They added that with budget cuts that have choked arts funding and tougher standards that demand literacy skills in every class, the extra hours have proved invaluable — so much so, that some classroom teachers have volunteered to work overtime as program tutors.

“There are not enough instructional minutes from 8:30 to 3:30 in which we can provide this well-rounded education for our children,” said Dawn Brooks DeCosta, principal of Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School, an extended-day pilot school in Manhattan.

Of course, it’s yet to be seen whether EdLabs’ impressive math-tutoring results will translate to reading. And extra school-hours aren’t inexpensive — the pilot costs about \$3,000 per student, though that amount includes the trial-study costs.

Back at Highbridge, Elijah and his friend Manuelle Lamboy packed up their novels that afternoon and headed down to their chess and musical-theater classes. Manuelle knew he could be at home watching TV, but said he preferred the longer school day.

“It helps me become a better person on my own time,” he said.

This story is part of a multi-city series on expanded learning time, with funding from the Ford Foundation, which supports “more and better learning time” in high-need communities. Also participating in the series are the Notebook (Philadelphia), Catalyst Chicago, EdSource (California), and GothamSchools’ sister site EdNewsColorado.