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Parents Lend Extra Set Of Eyes, Ears To Peoria Teachers

By [DANA VOLMER](#) · MAR 5, 2020



Felicia Beeney (center) reads to her class bilingual first grade class while parent-mentor Sarah Johnson (far left) sits with students.

DANA VOLLMER /WCBU, PEORIA PUBLIC RADIO

Some students need extra help in the classroom and, much as they try, sometimes teachers can't do it all. The non-profit [Peoria Friendship House](#) has begun a mentorship program with the idea that some of the best teachers are parents.

Felicia Beeney has taught in Peoria Public Schools for 16 years, recently taking over a bilingual first grade class at Lincoln School.

This year she's not always alone in the classroom. Two hours a day, four days a week, volunteers from the [Parent Mentor Program](#) come in to lead storytime, organize activities, and work with students one-on-one if they're falling behind.

Each of Beeney's 16 students is at a different stage in their English as a second language (ESL) education. At least three started the year performing below their grade level.

Beeney said it can be challenging to tackle each student's unique needs on her own.

"There are so many things that are expected from us as teachers that we cannot do without feeling overwhelmed," she said. "It's just too difficult — every day there's something new, something different."

Beeney said parental help lets her work on projects she has not had time to do.

"Thanks to them, I feel like my room has more than ever — more activities, more [organization]," she said. "In two hours, they can do a lot, as long as I tell them what it is I need and want from them."



A parent-mentor works one-on-one with one of Felicia Beeney's first grade students at Lincoln School.

CREDIT DANA VOLLMER

Beeney's classroom is one of four participating in the Parent Mentor Program this year. The goal is as much to increase parental involvement as it is to offer support to students.

The program launched in October at Lincoln, as well as Roosevelt Magnet School.

To participate, mentors must be a parent, grandparent, or other close relative of a student in the same school.

Chicago has had the program for nearly 25 years. Peoria Friendship House President and CEO Robert Montgomery said grant money let them bring the idea to Peoria.

"District 150 is probably one of the worst school districts in the country and they've been wracking their brain trying to figure out how they're going to bring up these test scores," he said. "One of the things they know is necessary is parental involvement in education."

Both [Lincoln](#) and [Roosevelt](#) are among the lowest performing schools in the state, according to Illinois School Report Card data.

On top of low test scores, Montgomery said schools grapple with understaffing and teacher retention challenges.

"This is a problem across the country," he said. "You go into any classroom right now today, just pick a random classroom, you're going to have about 30 kids with one teacher. You might luck out and find a classroom that has a teacher's aide in it. But you don't have a lot of adult presence in the classrooms."

Montgomery said there are a slew of other benefits for parents, students, and teachers.

"The byproduct is that the kids listen and they sit down and they participate in class," he said. "Most of these parents, what they'll tell you is that when they first went into the classroom, the class was like total mayhem and maybe two or three kids are sitting down and listening."

That is the experience of Chiquita Brown, a parent-mentor in a 3rd grade class at Lincoln.

Brown said the relationship she has with students is different than the relationship they have with their teacher.

"The way the kids come to me is more respectful than how they do the teacher," she said. "If I could put my foot in the teacher's shoes, I probably wouldn't want to do the class anymore. I probably would have left. I think it's because we're like one-on-one, probably someone they can trust to talk to."

Brown said she mostly helps kids struggling with math. But during one-on-one tutoring sessions, students often open up about other things going on in their lives.

"Most kids at home must not get that attention, even from a biological family [member], a guardian, or a foster parent," she said. "They're not going to spill the beans and say 'I need this love and affection.' They're going to find it somewhere else."

Brown recognizes her role as a parent-mentor is to help students learn. But, she said she sometimes feels more like a mother or social worker.



Sarah Johnson, a parent-mentor at Lincoln School, reads to Felicia Beeney's first grade class.

CREDIT DANA VOLLMER

Sarah Johnson is one of the parent-mentors who help out in Felicia Beeney's first grade classroom. Johnson, a single mother and full-time CPA, said she was inspired to join the program as a segue to a more fulfilling career.

"Not only did it put me in the school that my kids are in at, so they know that I'm there and they act a little better, but it opens the door to something I've always been inspired to do — not teach, but mentor. Help people," she said.

Johnson has three children who attend Lincoln school. She said her impression of the resources available to students has changed drastically since she started working in the school.

"Some of the teachers kind of are over it and you can tell," she said. "I just feel like there's a loss for care."

Johnson said she understands why teachers feel burnt out: class sizes are too large and educators aren't paid enough.

She said initiatives like the Parent Mentor Program are great, but only mask the problem.

"I'm going to try to say this as nice as I can ... I think if they paid more attention to paying teachers what they need, they would be happier, maybe not so stressed out," she said. "If there were more one-on-ones, more parent-mentors, more involvement into the schools, I think that would turn around our future's education."

Friendship House CEO Robert Montgomery said the success of the Parent Mentor Program will ultimately be determined by student standardized test scores.

Pre-testing took place in the fall. Students will be reassessed this spring.

"If they haven't improved in their test scores, then we need to go back to the drawing board and figure out what's really going on here," he said.

Beeney said she has already seen students grow since getting additional help.

"I can tell you right now that I have kids that were not reading — they basically were behind when they started first grade. I tried, but it was tricky to have one kid that could not even write a letter or produce the sound of those letters or form words," she said. "The number of students I have that are so low, it is much less. And I think it's thanks to these parents helping."

Beeney said she also hears interest from several other teachers in bringing the program to their classroom, if future grant funding allows.