

# METROWEST DAILY NEWS

## New Framingham program pairs retirees with students who lag in reading



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FRAMINGHAM — Twice a week, third grader Xavier Duvilaire goes to a quiet classroom in McCarthy Elementary School and dives into a book for 30 minutes.

Beside him each time is tutor Dave Wilkie, of Milford, listening and smiling and guiding him through the pronunciation of tricky words. The same scene plays out at two other tables.

The McCarthy and Stapleton elementary schools are in the early stages of a new pilot program with Literations, a Boston nonprofit that engages older adults to tutor children who lag behind in reading. Volunteers first came to the schools several weeks ago as strangers but have been forging bonds with students since.

"A couple of my students are so comfortable with me — if I screw up a word or something, they'll say, 'Jim, you skipped this word,'" said Jim Brenneman, of Natick. "They're enjoying it and they're keeping me on my toes, too."



At the Literations Program at the McCarthy Elementary School in Framingham, third grader Xavier Duvalaire reads with Dave Wilkie, of Milford, March 7, 2022. *Daily News And Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Art Illman*

## How does the program work?

Since 2017, Natick's MathWorks has partnered on various projects with the [Foundation for MetroWest](#), including a program that provided grants to local nonprofits struggling due to the pandemic. Craig Santos, senior director of MathWorks' training services, said the software company wanted to fund an effort to correct inequities in the region.

That sparked the Foundation's [Impact MetroWest](#) project, an interactive data website that identifies more than 50 indicators that measure quality of life in the region including racial disparities. From there, the Foundation and [MathWorks](#) joined forces with Literations and [Jewish Family Services of MetroWest](#) to put together a pilot program aimed at closing the learning divide.



At the Literations Program at the McCarthy Elementary School in Framingham, the helping hands of Jim Brenneman, of Natick, and third grader Yosvelyn Betancourth, reading together, March 7, 2022. *Daily News And Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Art Illman*

Right now, about 30 students from first to fourth grade are involved in sessions that are embedded into the school day. The aim is to boost reading skills by an average of 1.5 grade levels.

## **Very familiar relationship**

The program is known for using older volunteers. When he retired in July, Steve Payne tried to find ways to use his new free time. He turned to part-time consulting briefly, but called it unrewarding.

"You get paid a lot less money and you still have all the same issues that you retired from," said Payne, who lives in Ashland.

He stumbled upon the Literations opportunity and said it seemed like a "worthwhile adventure."





Retiree Steve Payne, shown working with third grader Natan Teixeira, said he joined the Literations Program because it "seemed like a worthwhile adventure." *Daily News And Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Art Illman*

Jay Kim, executive director of Foundation for MetroWest, said using older volunteers is the program's "secret sauce."

"There is a special bond that can be created between a grandparent and a child," he said. "In some ways it does mimic that kind of relationship. I think it's a very familiar relationship for many young people."

For tutoring to be effective, the student needs to feel at ease to be uncertain or ask questions, said Wes Enicks, executive director of Literations.

That relationship-building goes hand-in-hand with the program's literacy component, said he said.

"What happens with a lot of children at this age is they lack that confidence to learn. They don't want to make mistakes in front of peers," said Enicks.

## A look at the data

Impact MetroWest's 2019 data shows only 38% of Framingham third graders were proficient readers compared to the statewide 52%. Further, just 30% of African American/Black students and only 23% of Hispanic/Latino students in Framingham met or exceeded third grade reading proficiency.

Enick called a student's third grade reading skills a "a key indicator of future success."

"Up to third grade, students are really gaining those skills to read," he said. "From fourth grade on, they're using those skills to learn other content. So, if they're behind at that point, not only is that impacting their ability to read but it's impacting their ability to learn."



Natick retiree Jim Brenneman reads with third grader Yosvelyn Betancourth, March 7, 2022. *Daily News And Wicked Local*  
Staff Photo/ Art Illman

If they continue to fall behind, it can have a longer ripple effect, said Enicks.

MathWorks will keep a close eye on third grade English language MCAS exam scores for students of color in the pilot schools, said Mathworks' Santos. They'll compare the results from this target group against the larger group at the individual schools as well as against the larger Framingham group, he said.

Ideally, the percentage of Hispanic/Latino and African American/Black third graders in Framingham who are reading proficiently will increase significantly, he said.

## **Miles on the tongue**

On Monday, a new volunteer was learning the ropes at McCarthy's strand of the program, which will help the school launch morning sessions and reach more students. As the pilot expands, the aim is to have more than 50 students participating by the end of this school year and 150 in the next.

Volunteers do not introduce new material to students, but instead reinforce what they're already learning in class. So, if a student is working on word identification or needs more help with fluency, volunteers will get books to match that level.





Rosalia Morel, program coordinator for the Literations Program at the McCarthy Elementary School, said the program frees time for teachers, who often don't have time to engage struggling students with targeted one-on-one time. *Daily News And Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Art Illman*

It frees time for teachers, who often don't have time to engage struggling students with targeted one-on-one time while juggling a classroom full of other kids, said Rosalia Morel, a Literations program coordinator.

"We're helping the teachers kind of get the students' miles on the tongue," she said.

## **Extra services provided**

If a student mentions a problem at home during the course of a tutoring session, the volunteer can turn to Jewish Family Services, which will step in to help.

It can range from assistance with immigration to food or housing insecurity. Yemi Ajao, interim director of the district's Community Resource Development, said those services are tailored to meet specific student needs and ensure each child has a good home learning environment.

"Some of the students, the barriers they face, they exist outside of the walls of the school," said Ajao.

Lino Covarrubias, executive director of Jewish Family Services, said it also keeps the pressure off the tutor. Putting too much on the plate of a volunteer can dilute the mission, he said.

"A good volunteer always worries... we don't want that. We want the focus of the volunteer to be about literacy. Anything else about the family, JFS will be involved," said Covarrubias.

## How to get involved

If interested in volunteering for Literations in Framingham, [visit the nonprofit's website at Literations.org/volunteer](https://www.literations.org/volunteer) for more information. The commitment is a minimum of four hours per week for the full school year.

Payne said he's been heartened watching his students progress bit by bit. One student he works with has just advanced to a higher reading level and he thinks "she's encouraged by that."

Volunteer Wilkie said he's exhilarated to see his students gain ground.

"They're definitely improving every week," he said. "And the fact that they're enjoying it is kind of special."

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