

College Park closing gap; Forest Hills hopes to follow

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Every morning, Kevin Shaffer comes to check on Arquan Fleming.

Kevin gets Arquan settled in and ready for the day. Later on, he'll help him pick out a book in the library. The pair will even race on the track during recess.

Kevin usually wins, says Arquan, twisting in his seat as he answers a question about who's faster. Kevin, grinning, gently grabs Arquan's shoulders and turns him forward.

"You need to turn around and face the person you're talking to," Kevin tells Arquan.

The two are students at College Park Elementary – Arquan in kindergarten, Kevin in fifth grade. They're buddies – partnered up in a program that pairs students from different grade levels to work with each other throughout the year.

The program gives the kindergartners a built-in role model in their fifth-grade buddies, said kindergarten teacher Pam Jones. It softens the fifth-graders, too, reminding them that hard work is crucial when someone looks up to you, said fifth-grade teacher Natalie Lafferty.

For Jones, Lafferty and Principal Maria Greene, that combination of academic and social education is also what's closing the achievement gap at College Park.

There's a 20 percentage point difference between Greene's black and white students' test scores, down from the more than 40 percentage point gap when she came to College Park five years ago. That improvement made College Park a finalist for a statewide award last year highlighting high-poverty schools that have made significant progress toward closing the achievement gap.

Greene and her teachers have several methods for that. College Park students are known as the Can-Do Kids, practicing the Seven Habits of Happy Kids – a motivational book that encourages students to do things like "begin with the end in mind" and "think win-win." Students keep track of their work in data notebooks, recording their grades and attendance and setting goals for themselves.

What makes those programs successful, though, is the relationships. The whole school celebrates student achievement in monthly awards assemblies. Teachers are constantly wrapping kids up in hugs. Fifth-graders and kindergartners like Kevin and Arquan become close friends.

After a few more reminders to turn around, make eye contact, listen up, Kevin and



Photo by Laura Greene

Greg Uhl (left) volunteers his time to help fifth-graders Da'Shawn Clark (center) and Andy Thomas improve their reading skills as part of the WatchDOGS – Dads of Great Students – at Forest Hills Elementary School.

Arquan get back to their work. But not before Kevin leans down with a quiet word of encouragement.

“You did a good job,” he says. “I’m proud of you.

College Park is finding success in closing its achievement gap. Nearby Forest Hills Elementary School, with a 50 percentage point gap between black and white students, is hoping to mirror that achievement.

Murphy Averitt is shaking a lot of fifth-grade hands.

Averitt is a volunteer with the WatchDOGS – Dads of Great Students – at Forest Hills. He’s here to tutor a group of fifth-grade boys, and they’re spending their first few minutes getting acquainted.

The boys step up one at a time. Terryon Richardson, nice to meet you. Andy Thomas, nice to meet you, too.

Then fifth-grader Jehidi Horton sticks out his palm.

“Jehidi Horton,” he says. “Horton Industries.”

It’s a funny exchange. But it illustrates exactly what Principal Deb Greenwood is trying to do for Jehidi and his classmates – give them positive role models and give the community a reason to care about the school’s success.

Greenwood, who’s in her first year as principal at Forest Hills, inherited a lot when she came to the school: a tight-knit staff, a strong parent community – and a big achievement gap between black and white students.

One of Greenwood’s first duties as principal was learning that the school had been named a focus school for the year – in other words, a school with a big achievement gap – and figuring out how to fix that.

She’s put a strong emphasis on reading. The entire school will Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) for 10 minutes every morning. Students and their families come out for themed literacy nights every few months – a recent beach party brought 200 people, Greenwood said.

She’s also taken several of her biggest-need students – all boys, almost all minorities – and used them as a small-scale focus group. Right now, they’re meeting with the WatchDOGS for extra end-of-grade test practice.

Earlier this year, they met regularly with members of Cape Fear Community College’s basketball team to read.

Da’Shawn Clark liked that.

“We read for like 30 or 25 minutes,” he said, “and then we’d play basketball.”

But he also likes meeting with the WatchDOGS, because “they’re fun and they’re silly.”

They’re also confidence-boosters. Fifth-grader Jaylen Jenkins is working through practice questions with Averitt, and he’s feeling good about his answers.

“I got it right, didn’t I?” Jaylen asks.

“I think so – yeah,” Averitt answers.

Jaylen grins.

“I’m on fire,” he says.

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