



BULLETIN

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Michigan

Reading Tutors Give Kids a Boost

Experience Corps members work one-on-one with elementary school students to improve reading

by: Rick Haglund | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | January 1, 2012



AARP Experience Corps volunteers in Grand Rapids are tutoring elementary students in reading. Volunteers must be at least 55 and willing to commit to tutoring 15 hours a week. — *Photo by Livia Corona/Getty Images*

Bennie J. Hill retired as a secretary at Grand Rapids Public Schools in 1998. But she spends so much time at one of the school district's elementary schools that some teachers have asked Hill whether she's working again.

Hill, 78, is an AARP Experience Corps member, tutoring second- and third-graders at Dickinson Elementary in reading.

"I'm not a sit-at-home person," she said. "I like to be involved in things, and I love children."

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Bennie J. Hill tutors second- and third-graders in reading at Dickinson Elementary. — *Photo by Brian Kelly*

Hill, who is in her seventh year as an Experience Corps tutor, spends 20 hours each week working with 10 students to improve their reading skills. She works with each youngster for 30 minutes a day.

"It's a wonderful program," she said. "I don't call it a job, but you really have to stick with it."

Experience Corps was founded in 1995 as a way to use the talent and experience of older Americans in revitalizing communities. It became affiliated with AARP this month.

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The program places people 55 and older in elementary schools as reading tutors. Some assist with other tasks. In Grand Rapids, Experience Corps tutors focus solely on reading.

Volunteers are asked to commit a minimum of 15 hours a week.

Almost 70 percent of U.S. children enter fourth grade unable to read proficiently, according to a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Tutors in 19 U.S. cities

About 2,000 Experience Corps members tutor 20,000 at-risk kindergarten through third-grade students in 19 U.S. cities. Grand Rapids is the only Michigan participant.

The nonprofit Gerontology Network, which works to enhance the quality of life and promote the independence of older adults, has hosted Experience Corps in Grand Rapids since 2006. It will continue to screen and train tutors now that the program is affiliated with AARP.

"Reading is a key to success. If our kids can't read, they can't do anything," said Peggy Lawrence Burns of Gerontology Network.

Barb Quaintance, senior vice president for volunteer and civic engagement at AARP, said Experience Corps "has built an incredibly successful model, where kids and older adults thrive in a dynamic intergenerational exchange."

She said AARP "will be the 'jet fuel' to help Experience Corps grow substantially" in additional cities. "We know that our members are interested in helping kids, and we hope to recruit many of them to serve as Experience Corps tutors."

In a national study conducted in 2009, Washington University in St. Louis found that students working with Experience Corps tutors showed an average 60 percent improvement in sounding out words and reading comprehension compared with their peers who did not receive Experience Corps tutoring.

Nearly 80 percent of Grand Rapids third- and fourth-graders who received Experience Corps tutoring in 2009 improved their reading scores by one or two levels in the annual statewide reading test, according to Gerontology Network.

Tutors' lives enhanced

Another Washington University study found that 86 percent of Experience Corps volunteers reported that tutoring improved their lives.

"To see the children run up and hug you is very gratifying," Hill said.

Two dozen tutors work in six Grand Rapids elementary schools. Tutors must have a high school diploma and pass a criminal background check. They receive training in tutoring, appropriate behavior with children, confidentiality laws and other issues.

Some Experience Corps tutors receive small stipends for their work. In Grand Rapids, tutors receive a stipend of \$2.65 an hour plus mileage reimbursement.

To become an AARP Experience Corps tutor in Grand Rapids, contact the Gerontology Network at 616-771-9748. Although most of the slots are filled for the 2011-12 academic year, applications are accepted in case vacancies occur and for the 2012-13 school year.

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Rick Haglund is a writer living in Birmingham, Mich.