

Tutoring a Win-Win for Everyone

Volunteers help young readers in need and avoid isolation

We all have that teacher we remember decades later, the adult who took a real interest in us when we were kids. For James Williams, that teacher was Ms. Yancy. Her special attention made him consider a career in teaching.

Williams went into banking, but his interest in teaching never waned. Now 71, the Shaker Heights retiree has become a classroom fixture through Experience Corps, a national AARP literacy tutoring program.

He spends 15 hours or more a week helping Cleveland students boost their reading skills. Over about a decade, he's tutored and inspired dozens of students at four urban public schools.

"I tell them, 'Once you learn to read, you can go anywhere and everywhere,'" Williams said.

Experience Corps, now in 22 cities nationwide, matches volunteers 50 and older with struggling

students in kindergarten through third grade.

The program began in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, the only Ohio outpost, in 1997. It expanded to 15 city schools this fall and should reach 17 next year. More volunteers are sorely needed.

Helping students is critical in the lower grades, according to Joy Banish, executive director of Greater Cleveland Volunteers, which hosts the program.

"Children in kindergarten through third grade are learning to read," Banish said. "But after third grade, they're reading to learn."

Early literacy is increasingly important in Ohio, she said. The state's Department of Education recently adopted a Third Grade Reading Guarantee, which requires students to read at grade level or be held back, with certain exceptions.

Experience Corps trains its volunteers in various teaching methods

and learning styles. They work one-on-one with students throughout the year and achieve meaningful results, Banish said.

Readers make gains

About 90 percent of Cleveland teachers surveyed said Experience Corps tutors improved students' reading and literacy performance. Teachers also noted significant advances in attendance, participation in class and behavior.

"They may start slowly, but then they progress and progress," Williams said. "Seeing a light go on in a child's mind makes the effort worthwhile."

"I try to illuminate the possibilities that they might not see for themselves," he added. "But I also let them know they have to work at it. I hope and pray the students I touched have gone on to higher things."

Experience Corps tutored 875 Cleveland students in the 2013-14

school year. AARP volunteers make that kind of widespread impact possible for public schools and other nonprofit projects in need, said Kelley Neal, community outreach specialist for AARP Ohio.

"Folks who've been working all their lives have accumulated so many skills they can still use," Neal said.

Volunteers add a sense of credibility, she noted: "They're there because they have a passion for the organization or cause."

In general, volunteering is a win-win, Neal said. People who give back make a positive difference in their communities, avoid isolation, learn new things and meet like-minded people.

Plus, studies indicate that there are overall health benefits for older volunteers.

"Across the board, studies have shown that volunteering increases happiness," Neal said. "The more you volunteer, the happier you are. Who wouldn't want that?"

For more information about volunteering with Experience Corps in Cleveland, contact Greater Cleveland Volunteers at 216-391-9500, ext. 119; email EC@greaterclevelandvolunteers.org; or go to greaterclevelandvolunteers.org.

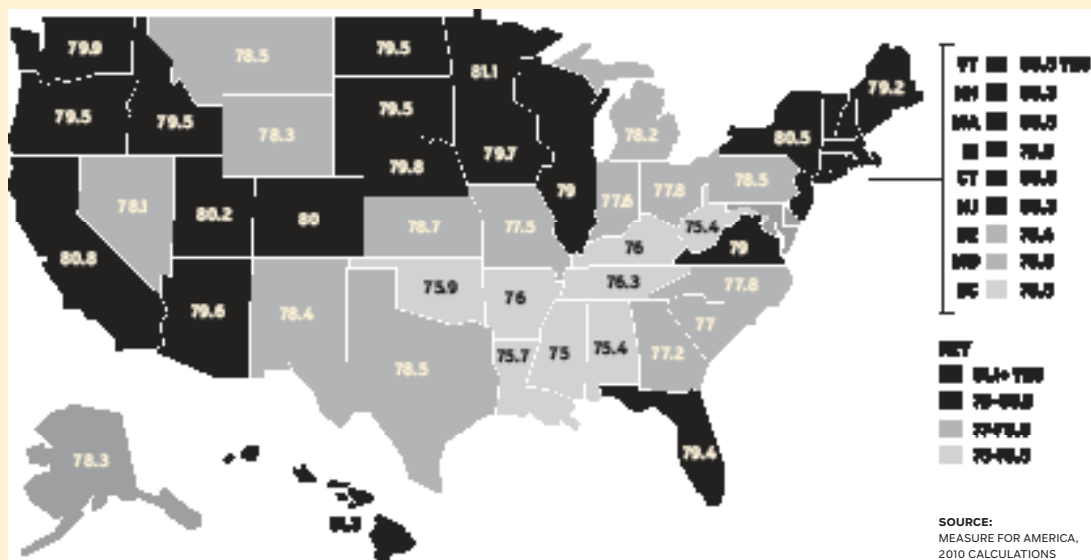
To learn about other volunteer opportunities throughout the state, go to createthegood.org, a searchable database sponsored by AARP.

—Sarah Hollander

■ Databank USA

Life Expectancy at Birth

Projected ages for individuals in each state and D.C.



5.9 Percent

of Ohio workers 50-plus were unemployed in 2012—27th highest among the states, according to a recent AARP Public Policy Institute report. For more data on older workers, go to aarp.org/futureofwork.

For other Ohio news, go to aarp.org/oh