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Newsome-Bailey Academy helping at-risk students with basic learning skills





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Rob Ostermaier/Daily Press Photos Teacher for the Newsome-Bailey Academy program Marci Radecki works with students that need a little extra help after school at Newsome Park Elementary. (Rob Ostermaier, Daily Press / December 8, 2011)

By Samieh Shalash, sshalash@dailypress.com |

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NEWPORT NEWS — The room hums with the sound of squeaky shoes, sticks of chalk moving across the board and four boys racing to complete their work.

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Second-grader Rahsaan Carter grips a gold-colored chalk holder and quickly draws sloppy white loops on the board. 3.

"I got it!" he yells as he completes a rhythmic writing exercise. JW-

Carter is one of seven students enrolled in Newsome-Bailey Academy, a nonprofit intervention program for low-income, low-performing second graders who attend Newsome Park Elementary in the city's Southeast Community.

The after-school program, launched six weeks ago, is for **Newport News** students who can fall between the cracks, says educational chair Wanda Parks: They don't qualify for special education services, and tutoring is not a long-term fix.

At the academy, educational therapists move students through hands-on activities designed to strengthen their cognitive skills.

They count backward from 100 as they shoot baskets, think of what numbers should be added to a playing card to make it equal 10, and sound out the first letter in a word before saying it: "Ff ff ff fat."

Every student in the program this year tested below grade level in reading, writing and math but exceeded their grade level in oral language, Parks said.

Students with strong oral skills can be perceived as being at grade level when they are actually falling behind, Parks said.

"When there's not intervention, kids fall farther and farther behind the gap," she said. "It becomes so big they can't catch up."

Stealing words

Educational therapist Marci Radecki describes the first few weeks of the academy as chaotic, with the boys sometimes hitting each other or using harsh words.

They gradually built relationships with therapists and began getting along as a group, she said.

Radecki and colleague Barbara Elberfield work to balance therapy with discipline, bouncing between managing student behavior and leading them in activities that hone their learning skills.

In a counting exercise that requires the students to figure out which number to add to a digit to make it equal 10, one boy struggled during his turn, looking down and slowly counting on his fingers.

Another wiggled in his chair, bursting with the answer before finally shouting it out.

"Give him thinking time," Radecki admonished. "When you speak for him, you steal from him. You steal his time to think."

The academy encourages students to take time and reason through their answers instead of giving hurried guesses.

The therapists use methods developed by the National Institute of Learning Development meant to

help students with basic learning skills, such as focusing on a teacher's voice and being able to understand the main points of a lesson.

Students don't bring their homework to the after-school academy, and Parks stresses that there is no tutoring involved.

"We're not interested in their academic subjects, we're interested in teaching the brain to think and building habits in these boys that make cognition clearer for them," Radecki says. "If we do our job well, the school subjects will improve as well."

Newsome-Bailey Academy, named for attorney Thomas Newsome and singer **Pearl Bailey**, partnered with Newport News Public Schools this year to offer the program, which is paid for in full by the academy. It runs from school closing time to 5:45 p.m.

Its budget for the first year is \$51,022, which includes educational therapists and instructional materials.

For now, the plan is to add a class of 12 students next year, and another class of 12 the following year, until it is offered in grades 2-4.

Angie Swogger, who chairs the advancement committee, said she volunteers her time with the academy because of the powerful affect the therapy had on her son at for-profit institutions when he was younger.

"It's why I'm interested in seeing this available for children, especially those who are at-risk and without intervention don't seem to stand a chance," she said. "I think this is really going to be a groundbreaker."

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