

UNCW program helps children improve reading skills

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“This is a cat,” reads 8-year-old Taleeyah Perry. “Mud is on the cat.”

“You cruised right through that one!” says her tutor, Darryl Harrison.

Every Monday through Thursday, Taleeyah and Darryl meet after school at Wilmington’s Hillcrest Community Center to read. Taleeyah is one of 17 elementary school-age students and Darryl one of 70 trained college tutors taking part in a new, aggressive reading program offered by the University of North Carolina Wilmington for at-risk kids.

“These are people who would never otherwise have access to something like this,” said John Rice, UNCW sociology professor.

Rice, along with Marty Kozloff, a professor in education, and graduate student Eric Irizarry, put the reading program into action at Hillcrest after the annual North Carolina ABC’s accountability report card showed a

near 20 percent drop in academic performance among New Hanover County African-American students within one year.

“Only 40 percent were at or above grade level last year. This year it was 22 percent,” Rice said. “Only 22 percent of black boys in New Hanover County are at or above grade level and the rest are not?How is this ok? ...With anybody? These are children.”

Setting up camp in the middle of one of Wilmington’s downtown housing developments, the reading team moved in to the Hillcrest Center, recruited UNCW students to volunteer as tutors and had them trained by the Roger Bacon Academy of Leland in a special phonics and repetition based teaching model called Direct Instruction.

“It’s scientifically validated as the most effective way to teach....It’s backed by over 40 years of research

UNCW student Darryl Harrison, left, shares a fun moment while teaching reading to Taleeyah Perry at the Community Campus at Hillcrest Wednesday, February 11, 2009. Staff Photo By Matt Born

hundreds of thousands of kids,” Rice said. “We knew it was going to work and it is.”

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Going door to door getting kids signed up for the free one-on-one tutoring sessions launched the program in September with 17 students ages 4 to 8. Three months later with just nine hours of instruction, 13 of the 17 students enrolled were brought up to and above grade level. The other four tested even higher, with some now an entire year ahead.

“You can really see the transformation,” Harrison said. “Before she’d be stumped and sit there and just look it; now she looks at the story and piece by piece sounds it out and puts it together.”

Taleeyah said, “I feel more comfortable now. Before I didn’t know any words that much.”

“Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons” by Siegfried Engelmann is the Direct Instruction book used at Hillcrest. It focuses on teaching five basic principals [sic] to master decoding and understanding of words. Rice said the Hillcrest kids went from not getting any sounds correct in September to getting 40 correct within a minute by December. More importantly, he said, they went from not knowing how to read a book to

devouring any book they can get their hands on.

“These kids have basically doubled their reading skills in 26 days. We didn’t expect results that major in such a short amount of time.”

“The collateral advantage to all of this is they’re learning to love learning itself. They’re not only learning to read, they’re learning it’s kind of cool to be educated,” Rice said.

“All of them have made a drastic improvement,” Irizarry said. “These kids have basically doubled their reading skills in 26 days. We didn’t expect results that major in such a short amount of time.”

The Hillcrest Community Center is now an official UNCW extension campus. UNCW Chancellor Rosemary DePaolo signed an official partnership agreement with the Wilmington Housing Authority that gave access to the Hillcrest facility and has been very pleased with the tutoring program’s results taking place as a result.

“When you go down there, you can watch that learning happening right in front of you ... it’s impossible not to learn,” DePaolo said.