

Program bolsters kids' reading skills

Learning Curve

By Robert Nott | The New Mexican

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Ruth Duarte's 9-year-old son, Miguel Valencia, is awake, showered and ready to read by 6 a.m. every morning these days. He is one of 32 third- and fourth-graders taking part in Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences' Hooked on Books Reading is Magic camp, which started last week and runs through Friday. This 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily reading-intensive program's goal is to ensure that these youngsters don't get held back because they can't read to their grade level. It stresses a creative atmosphere of engagement and fun as the volunteer teachers and tutors use drills, lessons and original literacy-based games to stress phonics and reading comprehension.

Duarte noticed that Miguel was falling behind in reading at César Chávez Elementary School. So did his teacher, Adrienne Powell, who recommended him for the program. "He loves school. It's good that he got to go to this program," Duarte said of her son. "Now he can read posters or signs or whatever when we are driving by them."

The summer program is part of Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences' Hooked on Books campaign. The school, a private nonprofit pre-K through eighth-grade entity serving about 120 students, initiated this communitywide movement to get kids to read — whatever they want to read, just as long as they were reading. The school's student-run Alliance for Literacy kick-started this reading campaign last October.

The summer program, which is free for students, is funded by a McCune Charitable Foundation grant, Principal Rayna Dineen said. The 32 students are divided into two classrooms, each with a couple of volunteer teachers and volunteer teen tutors at the helm. "We are giving these kids a toolbox of phonics and tons and tons of reading practice," Dineen said during a recent visit to the summer program. "It's about building confidence, because many of the lowest-level readers lack confidence."

Perli Cunanan, executive director for the school, agreed: "A lot of kids who have learning difficulties are actually very bright; they just see words differently than the rest of us. If they don't understand them, they can lose confidence and the internal motivation to go to school. They become fearful of being curious about things."

Teen tutor Merari Santos, who will be entering the 10th grade at the New Mexico School for the Arts this August, said he had a lot of trouble reading when he was a kid. Part of it was being bilingual, he said, but part of it was the fact that he "just didn't enjoy reading." His interest in history led him to start reading history books, which slowly helped turn him on to the joys of reading.

Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences promoted the program via a mass email to former Santa Fe Public

Schools Superintendent Bobbie Gutierrez and the principals of all the schools in the district. Teachers recommended struggling readers in their classes for the program. Dineen said about 90 students applied for the school; but only 32 were accepted on the first-come, first-serve basis. She said the school is looking to find ways to fund tutors to help those who did not get in this year.

The program's theme revolves around medieval stories and characters, with the kids earning points through literacy games and practice to eventually rise from the position of villager to page to squire to prince/princess to knight. They create their own stories through a game of word Twister, play a word-based game of baseball that allows them to advance as many bases as the difficulty of the word they choose (i.e. a third-base word is tougher than a first-base word), and even hopscotch their way to learning words. Fire-breathing dragons, damsel in distresses and knights with swords figure prominently in the daily lessons.

Dineen hopes to raise money to offer the program again next year. To learn more about the Hooked on Books campaign visit www.nmallianceforliteracy.org.