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Learning continues at after-school program

Forest Park First Baptist Church starts free program

By Jeffery Whitfield

As he does each week, Allen Johnson went to Forest Park First Baptist Church on Wednesday to help students focus on their academics as part of a community after-school program offered there.

"I work with fourth-graders. I make them get their homework out and they have it listed so they can get focused," said Johnson, a member of the church and a retired educator with more than 30 years of experience teaching in Clayton County. A member of the Clayton County Board of Education, Johnson was instrumental in establishing the after-school program by working with school system officials.

For about two hours, the 76-year-old, a volunteer, worked with Hispanic children as they read stories aloud to him and then wrote out summaries similar to book reviews.

"Their penmanship is good and they comprehend pretty well," Johnson said, adding that despite their age, the students' English-speaking skills were impressive.

Each day volunteers help students work on math problems, English grammar, and reading and writing skills. And sometimes students work on science, he said. Groups such as the Forest Park Police Department also work with students during the after-school program.

Up to 32 children routinely attend and many speak Spanish, which Johnson said doesn't surprise him. The Spanish-speaking population in the city of Forest Park has been growing in recent years and the church now has a ministry to serve the Hispanic population.

"Our after-school program is as diverse as the county itself," said Chad Ellis, who served as launch director for the church program.

According to statistics from Clayton County Public Schools, slightly more than 47 percent of Hendrix Drive Elementary's student population is Hispanic and more than 44 percent of Fountain Elementary students are Hispanic. Both schools, where students for the church's after-school program come from, are in Forest Park.

Hendrix Drive Elementary also is the proposed site for the Unidos Dual Language Charter School, the first dual-language charter school that would open in Georgia if the state Board of Education approves it.

Funded by the church and the Forest Park Kiwanis Club, which Johnson is a member of, the after-school program is held Monday through Friday from 3 to 5 p.m. for students who cannot afford to attend other after-school programs. It is free for families whose children attend the program. Children from grades three to five are bussed in for the program from Hendrix Drive and Fountain Elementary schools and parents pick them up when it's over.

A large number of students attending after-school programs offered by the school system also have a Spanish-speaking background, according to Denise Kendrick, supervisor of the school system's Campus Kids Program.

After-school programs are offered at all elementary schools and seven middle schools. A total of about 3,000 students attend the programs each day after school is over, Kendrick said.

"Most parents that enroll their children are those that work," she said.

Residents interested in enrolling children in the programs pay \$40 each week to have their children attend after-school programs at elementary schools. They pay \$35 each week to have their children attend programs at middle schools. The tuition covers all items provided during programs as well as employee salaries, Kendrick said.

Founded in 1991 as a way to prevent "latch-key kids," the after-school programs feature physical education activities, provide students with a nutritious snack such as cereal or fruit, allows them time to do their homework as well as time for arts and crafts activities.

"We tell parents we offer extended child-care service," Kendrick said.

Ellis said the church's program wasn't established to compete with existing after-school or tutorial programs offered by the school system.

In September 2005, the after-school program at the Forest Park First Baptist Church was launched as an experiment and it is now a full-fledge initiative the church hopes to keep running as long as it can, according to Tony Davis, who now operates the program as the minister of community ministries and minister of music at the church.

"We want to be able to develop a program that is reproducible in other communities," he said.

Davis said the program's goals are to create a safe environment where children are encouraged to excel academically and to improve attitudes and decision-making skills through positive character-building lessons.

Church officials worked with school administrators to start the after-school program to ensure it would complement rather than compete with anything offered by the school system, Ellis said.

"Principals looked at (student) applications so as not to enroll those already in the school programs," he said.

A total of about 40 volunteers now work with children at the church's after-school program each week, with a rotation of eight working with students each day.

The volunteers are between the ages of 60 and 80, and despite their age, they are able to manage children well, Johnson said.

"We have some rules and regulations [children] have to follow. If not, we call the parents," he said.