Reading Buddies: one morning a week for Philadelphia’s Future

By Jean Warrington and Emilie Harting

Every Tuesday morning, five friends from Chestnut Hill drive together 20 minutes down Germantown Ave to Fairhill, North Philly. We are reading buddies at Fairhill Elementary School as we listen to one child at a time read aloud. The third grade classrooms are bright, peaceful, and happy. When the teacher asks who wants to read, many hands go up. We find our seats at small tables, and the children bring their books over to us. The children are eager, focused, serious. They have been told that reading is the key to success, and they really want to learn. We listen, we encourage, we help sound out words, asking what they understand. Our job is the most satisfying we do all week.

The difference in educational opportunity between Chestnut Hill and Fair Hill is the subject of a recent book, Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance, by Susan Neuman and Donna Celano, who taught at Chestnut Hill College and now La Salle. Nicolas Kristof in the NYTimes mentioned this book in his article “For Obama’s New Term, Start Here”, Jan 23. As expected, educational opportunity follows economics. Chestnut Hill is the richest neighborhood in Philadelphia, and Fairhill is the poorest.

The children in Fairhill are as curious and bright and friendly as any we know, but many of them have few books or computers at home, few adults with time or skills to help them read, few text resources in their neighborhoods to build the information capital they will need to succeed.

Learning to read in the first three grades of elementary school is crucial. According to Donald Hernandez, a sociology professor at Hunter College, "a student who can't read on grade level by 3rd grade is four times less likely to graduate by age 19 than a child who does read proficiently by that time. Add poverty to the mix, and a student is 13 times less likely to graduate on time than his or her proficient, wealthier peer." Another study at the University of Chicago found that third grade reading level is a predictor of eighth grade reading level and a predictor of graduation and college attendance, even when demographic characteristics were included as controls." Other studies indicate that those who graduate from high school are much less likely to be incarcerated.

Reading buddy programs are growing with 21 locations now in Philadelphia. Come join the Historic Fair Hill reading buddies in Fairhill North Phila. Contact jeanwarrington@verizon.net 215-242-6974 for more information.