



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

Allison Fore

Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Officer

312.751.6633

allison.fore@mwrdd.org

100 East Erie Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611

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WITS program fosters reading skills through MWRD mentors



Cordelia Henry works with a student as part of the WITS program.



Ouidie Pollard and a student work together on a project.

Staff at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) know the importance of giving back. That's why nearly every week throughout the school year dozens of employees forego their lunch break to tutor local students as part of the Working in the Schools (WITS) reading mentorship program.

Staff members visit Manierre Elementary School, 1420 N. Hudson Ave., to participate in the WITS program by reading to second and third grade students who are at risk of falling behind in their school work.

"The WITS program is a great way for us to give back to the community and make an impact on the students' lives," said President Mariyana Spyropoulos. "We have generous employees who are willing to give their personal time to become tutors."

In 2003, the MWRD began sending volunteers to the WITS reading program at the behest of the late MWRD Commissioner Joanne Alter, who co-founded the program and turned it into a successful tutoring program for at-risk youth. The commissioner felt that too many children were not read to, and that all children should experience listening to a story because this was a productive exposure for students learning how to read.

"The students love their WITS volunteers, and it makes me so happy to see them enjoying reading. It's a big boost to their confidence and interest in school," said Denise Gross, third grade teacher at Manierre School.

When children are read stories, they are able to comprehend at a far higher level than they can while reading themselves, so being read

to by others encourages students to listen and learn to read better, teachers say. Throughout the years, teachers at Manierre School began to notice this impact.

"WITS is a part of the routine. The kids ask every Wednesday, 'Is today WITS? Is my tutor coming?'" They love it," said Jamil Haywood, also a third grade teacher at Manierre.

The tutors also find it rewarding to volunteer. They enjoy the opportunity to watch a student's reading skills blossom before their eyes.

"Volunteering with WITS benefits both the child I read with, as well as myself," MWRD environmental specialist Preet Mittal said. "I started volunteering with WITS to share my love of reading, but it has developed into much more. Through WITS, I have the opportunity to watch a child develop as she gains an appreciation for reading. I also have learned how different each child is and how to create an interest in reading. This helps me at home also, with my own children."

Every week, about two dozen MWRD employees board a big yellow school bus that takes them to the school, where they meet with students and read to them. Between all the MWRD volunteers, there were 380 different reading sessions throughout the last year at Manierre. These visits leave a mark in more ways than one, volunteers said.

"I am in the WITS reading program just to try to make a difference with the children," said MWRD senior buyer John Kappel. "With the hour I give, I hope to be a reading role model for them and leave them with a lasting positive impression."

Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

Established in 1889, the MWRD (www.mwrdd.org) is an award-winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.