



Strengthening Families & Communities

HOMEWORK CLUB GETTING GOOD GRADES

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by Annmarie Timmins

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FRANKLIN – A year ago, David Pelletier, 13, followed school with video games or cartoons. Stacie Benoit, 12, talked on the phone. Kim Sweetser, 13, remembers being bored.

Homework, when they got to it, wasn't high on their lists. Now they stay after school four nights a week for Homework Club and say it's the best part of their day. "I'm getting better grades coming here," said Sweetser, who for the first time was so proud of her midterm report card she wanted to show it off. "And I get to hang out with my friends. It's really cool."

Casey Family Services, part of a national non-profit that concentrates on families, introduced Homework Club a year ago in January at the Franklin Middle School. The club, which is free to parents, matches kids and tutors for two-and-a-half hours after school for a snack and then an hour each of homework help and supervised playtime.

Homework still isn't a favorite, although kids said they dread it less now that they have a teacher nearby for help. So tutors devote the first hour to homework and the second to playtime, using the latter as an incentive. Last week, kids bowled, made bracelets and played board games. When the weather is nice, they go outside for kickball and walking. The club has become incredibly popular with parents, kids and teachers. When school opened this fall, there was a waiting list for the 100 spots in the club.

"It's awesome. I know my kids are at school doing their homework and not running around looking for something to do," said Alison Pinette, who has two sons in the club, Danny Berwick 13, and Nicholas Pinette, 10. Both boys are getting better grades and have developed better study habits since they started going to the club, she said. "And it (makes for) a lot less stress on parents. I can come home and get supper ready, and they come home with their homework done."

Franklin teamed up with Casey last year when the nonprofit asked if it could bring in a social worker, a family counselor and tutors to work with the city's kids and their families. Casey would pick up the tab and let Franklin school officials decide how it could use the help.

Bill Grimm, chairman of the school board, remembers thinking the offer seemed too good to be true. School officials checked references (Casey has done this in every other New England state and in Maryland) and began writing a wish list.

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Aside from Homework Club, Casey has offered parenting classes for dads, regular family fun nights, a summer program and self-esteem talks for kids. The group also built a ropes challenge course outside the school and a rock climbing wall in the gym. Casey has an office in the middle school, and guidance staff refers families there for support and help they'd have to pay for somewhere else.

This spring, Casey is adding a support group for Bosnian families and a first aid course. And the nonprofit is talking with school officials now about expanding enrollment for the current summer activity program and adding summer school classes. "They have certainly done a lot of things that we could never have done," said Grimm. "It's already been very helpful, and I don't think we've determined or found all the potential areas yet."

Mimi Wheeler, supervisor of the group's programs in Franklin, said her staff looked all over the state for a school district that needed help and wanted it. Wheeler said Franklin's high rate of poverty, high school dropouts and teenage pregnancies qualified it for consideration. But its enthusiastic staff won Casey over, she said.

"Yes, the need is high," Wheeler said. "But everyone wants to make a big difference in that community." Walter Anacki, principal of the middle school, was one of the most welcoming. The school did not have the money to offer its own after-school program. And there wasn't a strong sense of community. For example, Wheeler said, school staff asked Casey to set up shop in the middle school as opposed to an elementary school because it didn't have a parent-teacher organization.

Parents are calling asking how they can get their kids into Homework Club, he said. Teachers, both those hired by Casey to tutor after school and those who aren't, stay after school longer to work with kids. Kids and teachers have come to know one another in a deeper way that pays off in the classroom, he said. Several staff members talked about a new respect they hadn't noticed before.

"We love it," said Anita Wilcox, a sixth-grade teacher who also tutors for the club. "Morale is great. We get to play with the kids and also help them."

"Teachers tell me their kids are doing better in class and getting their work done. And they know they can tell us about their kids who need extra help. They can say, 'Johnny owes me social studies,' and we can make sure he gets it done."