



Kelly Scanlon:

Welcome to Banking on Kansas City. I'm your host, Kelly Scanlon. Joining us on this episode is Pauly Hart, the executive director of Lead to Read, an organization that's working to improve childhood literacy in Kansas City. Welcome, Pauly.

Pauly Hart:

Thanks for having me, Kelly.

Kelly Scanlon:

Such an exciting program that you're a part of, Lead to Read. It's Kansas City's largest literacy volunteer corps. So, tell us more about the mission and why there's even a need for an organization like Lead to Read?

Pauly Hart:

Well, our goal is to provide a bright future for the kids in Kansas City, and so our mission is to improve the reading, and the social, and the emotional skills of the children in kindergarten through third grade. We do this by reading with them in the classrooms once a week.

Kelly Scanlon:

You have some pretty startling statistics about that third grade marker. That's a very critical point in a child's education, and so that's why you've earmarked this group. Talk to us about why that's so important, that third grade reading level.

Pauly Hart:

Right. So, we focused on the younger children up to third grade, and the reason is because third grade literacy is critical to a child's future. It's really one of the major indicators of success in life, and it's just third grade. You would think that there's plenty more going on, but actually third grade is the marker. Between birth and third grade, children are learning to read. They're learning language, they're learning phonics, letter sounds, and all of that good stuff. When they go into the fourth grade classroom, suddenly they are expected to read to learn. So, there's this switch that happens and if the children are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, they enter that fourth grade classroom behind. They can't keep up, and they end up being four times more likely to drop out of high school. 85% of our teens that are involved in the juvenile justice system are functionally illiterate. So that third grade year is the

year where we want to get these kids reading proficiently. To do that, they need the emotional, and the social skills, and the support that our volunteer reading mentors can provide.

Kelly Scanlon:

As far as the origin of this, who recognized that this was needed and how did it get started?

Pauly Hart:

Our program was started by Lynn and Jean Rundle, a husband and wife team, and they got involved in it because they were working with teenagers in the inner city. They suddenly realized that as teenagers, middle school students, they couldn't read. So they took a step back and thought, "Wait a minute. There's something going on here." They were both educators, they did some research, and they realized and discovered that third grade literacy is the key. Being able to read is going to help get these kids out of poverty and break that whole cycle of poverty. So, Lynn and Jean started it in 2011 and-

Kelly Scanlon:

So, it's not really a very old program. Less than 10 years, yeah.

Pauly Hart:

We are approaching our 10th year, so we're very pleased with that. We started with one classroom in Kansas City, Kansas, and today we are in 52 classrooms serving 1,100 children every week.

Kelly Scanlon:

So it's expanded greatly, and this is a volunteer program. So obviously you need lots of volunteers. How do you match the volunteers? What is the commitment? What's the format?

Pauly Hart:

Sure. So, our model is pretty simple. First of all, we always strive to be the easiest, most meaningful volunteer experience in Kansas City. The way we do that is we pair caring adults with children in urban classrooms to read once a week for 30 minutes. What happens is, it falls during the middle of the day. So, it's during the lunch hour for the adult. I always assure people that there's no food going on in the classroom. The children are not at lunch. This is a whole class program where if there are 22 children in the classroom, we bring in 22 adults.

Kelly Scanlon:

So, it's one on one pairing.

Pauly Hart:

It is one on one pairing, and our volunteers are called reading mentors. They are paired with a student who they read with each week for the course of one school year.

Kelly Scanlon:

So, they develop a relationship then. It's not each week a different person that comes to read to them.

Pauly Hart:

You're absolutely right. The relationship building component of our program has proven to be powerful beyond what we ever anticipated. We started in the schools to help the kids become stronger readers, and in the end we're helping them become stronger students, stronger people. Our reading mentors are really cheerleaders. They're role models, and they're advocates for the kids that they serve. It works out so well because they are paired with the same student each week, and the relationship building just blossoms.

Kelly Scanlon:

So, the commitment is for a school year then.

Pauly Hart:

We ask our volunteers to commit for one school year, and sometimes people think, "You know what? Once a week for a school year, that sounds like a long time," but actually it's an abbreviated school year because we get started in late September, early October, and whenever school is out we're out obviously for winter break and spring break. Then we're out of the schools in early May, but we have about an 80% retention rate for our volunteers year to year. They come back each year because it's such a meaningful experience and it's really just asking them to donate a lunch hour. A lot of our growth has happened in the past several years through the corporate and business community, and that's because businesses love getting their employees out into the community and doing this good work, and they can do it with very little lost productivity because it's a lunch hour.

Kelly Scanlon:

Absolutely.

Pauly Hart:

Our reading mentor volunteers love it because they can go during their lunch hour, and they don't have to donate or give up their weekends or evenings. So, it's really a win/win. I always say we've kind of found the sweet spot for volunteering, and that's why we have more than 1,200 volunteers who work with us every week.

Kelly Scanlon:

So, how are you measuring the success of the program? What are some of the outcomes that you can attest to, and then maybe even surprised you?

Pauly Hart:

We are in the middle of a two year program evaluation, so your timing is right for that question. After our first year, we had some really impressive, positive results. First graders in our program in two of the districts that we serve outperformed their control groups on their district reading assessments. Then our second graders, they outperformed their control groups in their sight word acquisition. Sight words are those words that kids come across everything they read. They're simple words that they just have to memorize. They have to know them on sight.

Kelly Scanlon:

Right, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Pauly Hart:

Words like the, was, is. They're the foundation for reading, so if we can give our students a boost in learning their sight words, they're halfway down the road to becoming proficient readers. So, those are two really strong academic indicators, outcomes that we're very proud of.

Kelly Scanlon:

Then what other kinds of outcomes are you seeing?

Pauly Hart:

Well, we're really pleased that our teachers in our survey last year, 100% of them reported that the students' attitudes about reading were positively improved.

Kelly Scanlon:

Shifting to that love of reading, of wanting to do it.

Pauly Hart:

Absolutely.

Kelly Scanlon:

It's not a task anymore.

Pauly Hart:

Yep.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah.

Pauly Hart:

100% of our teachers also reported that the students and the reading mentors were personally connected. They were seeing that those relationships, that these children were able to relate to and trust another caring adult.

Kelly Scanlon:

Why is that so important? Especially with this group.

Pauly Hart:

Well, it's so important because a lot of times these kids need another caring adult in their life. Sometimes they come from trauma or situations where they're struggling economically or what have you. If our volunteer can serve as one more caring adult in their life that they can trust and be a role model for them, that's exactly what we're looking for. I always say, who couldn't benefit from another caring adult in their life?

Kelly Scanlon:

Really, really.

Pauly Hart:

Then our volunteers have reported in their surveys as well, 97% of them report that they're satisfied with our program. Like I said, we have about an 80% retention rate, and 95% of them report that their student's attitudes about reading were positively influenced. So, we're seeing that the behavior of the student improves when they have a caring adult, their attitude toward reading, toward school improves. It's one more person in their life that can be their cheerleader, their advocate.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah, and going to the advocacy part of that, you have mentioned different situations where that reading mentor actually was able to call attention to something that maybe concerned them, that wasn't related to the reading, and action was taken in order to improve whatever that situation was.

Pauly Hart:

All of our reading mentors are mandated reporters. So, they are asked to report anything that they might be concerned about in terms of suspected abuse, or neglect, or anything that the child might say that could be concerning. So, what they do is they report that. It can be something as significant as, "My child that I'm reading with can't seem to see. They're holding the book up to their nose." So, we had that situation just recently where our volunteer recognized that the student couldn't see. They have been advocating to get that child glasses. Now, that can happen on its own in the school system, and the school systems do a great job of watching for that, but here we had one more person who noticed it earlier and was able to get that child glasses sooner.

Pauly Hart:

Then we have situations where maybe the kids in uniforms are looking ratty and dirty each week, and that's concerning. I know some schools are putting in washers and driers for that very reason, but what our volunteers have done is they have collected money and then donated school uniforms to the school nurse so that the school has a supply of clean uniforms when they need them for students.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yes, yeah.

Pauly Hart:

I like to say that Lead to Read's impact goes far beyond our reading sessions each week. Once our volunteers go into urban schools, they discover a whole world of opportunity. Oftentimes our volunteers would not have any reason to go into an urban school if it weren't for Lead to Read.

Kelly Scanlon:

Exactly.

Pauly Hart:

It often dispels some myths that people have and misconceptions that they have about our school systems. They walk in and see beautiful children and hardworking teachers and administrators, and they see opportunity to help. So, it often results in people or organizations making additional donations to our program, to the school, maybe providing school supplies, books, what have you. I like to just say that our program seems to be building bridges across our community. We provide an opportunity for people

to go into urban schools and urban classrooms and to actually put a face on urban education. So, it's no longer those schools that can't seem to figure out how to educate kids.

Kelly Scanlon:

Or all the negative statistics that you hear all the time.

Pauly Hart:

Absolutely.

Kelly Scanlon:

There's a child behind them.

Pauly Hart:

Right. What's wrong with that? Why can't they figure it out? Instead, our volunteers suddenly have a face on urban education. It's Elijah that I read with each week, or Tanisha who I read with each week. It becomes a personal commitment to help that child and that school succeed.

Kelly Scanlon:

When you extend this out, you're improving reading skills, you're building bridges between communities, you are potentially identifying other needs that the reading mentor identifies other than the reading issues, but you play that out. You had talked about how if you don't master some of these reading skills by this time, then it just sets you up for failure later. There's behavioral problems in the classroom later, there's more of that. So, sitting and giving up, giving, I say giving up. Actually, you're investing in 30 minutes of time a week to one child. That one child when you play it out through the rest of their lifetime and what that can do for that child, what it can do for our communities, what it can do for Kansas City in terms of lifting people up rather than becoming more negative statistics as the child grows.

Pauly Hart:

Exactly, and the thing is, is that we're working with really young children. Kindergarten through third grade, so it's hard to determine exactly what our impact is. I always say that our impact is probably going to be most visible down the road a few years.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yes.

Pauly Hart:

Because if you are illiterate, if you can't read, you will suffer consequences for the rest of our life. Unemployment, underemployment, getting involved in crime either as the victim or the perpetrator, and poor health outcomes are all associated with illiteracy. Right now, Kansas City is really focused. Our mayor and organizations are really focused with reducing our violent crime and getting guns and criminals off the streets, and that is a powerful, important initiative that everybody should be rallying around. So, hopefully what we're doing is trying to get ahead of all of that in preventing the guns and the criminals from getting on the street, by giving them the skills that they need to graduate from high

school, become employed and self sufficient, and contributing members of our community. We're really building the future workforce of Kansas City.

Kelly Scanlon:

There's various ways that people can get engaged, people listening today. If they want to come and read, they can do that, and there's other ways to get involved too. Talk to us about the engagement.

Pauly Hart:

Sure. We love to have more volunteers. There are always more children to serve, so I encourage everyone to sign up to become a reading mentor, and you do that on our website which is LeadtoReadKC.org, and you can become a reading mentor to a student where you read every week with that student. You can also choose to become what we call a shared reading mentor, and that's a great opportunity for people who have a lot going on in their lives and they're busy, but they still want to contribute. So, a shared reading mentor is somebody who partners with another adult, and between the two of you, one of you attends the reading session each week. So, that child now has two caring adults in their life. Then the third way to volunteer is what we call a flextra, and that's a flexible extra.

Kelly Scanlon:

I love that. A flexible extra, a flextra.

Pauly Hart:

A flextra is the person who just has a wackadoodle schedule and they're never going to be able to be there every week, but boy, do they want to get involved and they believe in it. So they say, "You know when I can come? I'm going to come. When I'm in town, I'll be there." So they come and they fill in for the people who are not there.

Kelly Scanlon:

Had something come up, and yeah.

Pauly Hart:

Exactly. So, they fill in for the absent volunteers. They're really the heroes because the kids are always looking for their volunteer. So, those are the three ways to get involved and all of our volunteers are required to go through a background screening, fill out the application on our website, and we will guide you through all those steps. Lead to Read is a free program to all of the schools and students that we serve, so there's no charge for a school to get involved with us. That means that we need to have community funding and support in order to provide this service.

Kelly Scanlon:

Mm-hmm (affirmative), sure.

Pauly Hart:

So, we are always open to donations and those can be made on our website as well, and they can include a classroom sponsorship which is \$5,000 dollars, or perhaps somebody wants to partially sponsor a student for a couple hundred dollars. Any donation of any size is always welcome. We really appreciate the love and support that Kansas City has shown us, and many of our companies and

foundations have really helped us grow our program. We will always have children to serve, so we're always looking to grow the program, and that requires funding.

Kelly Scanlon:

What about somebody who wants to start something within their organization? Maybe there's somebody listening who says, "Well, I work for a company that maybe should have the corporate program." Do they need to go talk to ... How does that work? How would they start that?

Pauly Hart:

I'm so glad you brought that up, because like I said, a lot of our growth in the past several years has happened through the business and corporate community. So, if you are interested in getting involved you just need to contact us on our website, and again it's LeadtoReadKC.org. Just let us know that you're interested in a partnership. I think the tab says partner with us. That way you can get some information to share with your company. We oftentimes go out and give presentations to companies during lunch and learns or staff meetings, and share the opportunity with organizations. Sometimes our partnerships with companies start with one person who just happened to decide they wanted to volunteer and they thought, "You know what? This is awesome. I'm going to go back and share this with my company." Then the next thing you know, we have five more. Then we have 10 more, and that's what happened at Country Club Bank. We had a few, and then we have several, many volunteers from Country Club Bank now. The thing I love about our corporate partnerships is it's really a team building experience for the employees.

Kelly Scanlon:

I can imagine, yeah.

Pauly Hart:

That's something, again, that we didn't really think about when we designed this but we always encourage the volunteers to carpool because elementary schools are not built for many cars.

Kelly Scanlon:

Sure.

Pauly Hart:

So, suddenly you have people who meet down in the lobby every Wednesday at a quarter to 12:00, and they pile in each other's cars and they drive over to their school, and they read for 30 minutes. Then they come back as a carpool. Well within that time, all of a sudden you've got people who get to know each other on a personal level. They may not work in the same departments, but they know each other through Lead to Read. It doesn't always have to be a corporate partnership or a business that gets involved. We have lots of individuals and we love our retirees who work with us as well. Our model is that we place our volunteers at schools that are located 10 to 15 minutes from their home or office. So, it really is one lunch hour. 10 to 15 minutes getting there, 30 minutes in the classroom, and 10 to 15 minutes and you're back at your office, you're back doing whatever it is that you're doing for the rest of the day.

Kelly Scanlon:

LeadtoReadKC.org. Pauly Hart, executive director, thank you so much Pauly for everything that you are doing for literacy in Kansas City, and to raise all of us up.

Pauly Hart:

Well, thanks for having me, and I'm really looking forward to hearing from some more volunteers. Without a doubt, our volunteers often say that their Lead to Read day is the best day of their week.

Kelly Scanlon:

I can understand why. Thanks again.

Pauly Hart:

Thank you.

Joe Close:

Thanks to Pauly Hart for coming on and sharing how Lead to Read strives to be the most accessible and most meaningful volunteer experience in Kansas City. Our associates take part in Lead to Read and speak so highly about the program and what it means to volunteer over their lunch hour. By becoming a reading partner, you become a mentor. You become another adult, an important adult, for your student to look up to while helping them strive for future success by improving their literacy skills. If you or your company are interested, reach out to Pauly. Get involved, get reading. Not only will these kids thank you, but our city will as well. Besides that, it's fun. Thanks for tuning in this week. We're banking on you, Kansas City. Country Club Bank, member FDIC.