

With kids, it turns out Experience does count

by David Sarasohn, The Oregonian

Wednesday June 10, 2009, 10:48 AM

When Lester Strong was in third grade, growing up in the gritty western Pennsylvania steel town of Braddock, the school district told his parents he was mentally retarded. That was a while before he went to Davidson College and Columbia University business school and had a 25-year career as a TV news anchor and executive.

Things turned out different from what the school district expected, explains Strong, because of three adults who thought differently about him: the parent of a friend, a minister and a barber. What a kid needs most, Strong concluded, is an adult who thinks the kid is important.

Now, as the new head of Experience Corps, Strong is in the business of providing them.

Experience Corps recruits and trains adults older than 55 and sends them into high-poverty elementary schools to work with kids who need some more help. Portland was one of its original five programs and now has about 60 Experience Corps volunteers, including some of the longest-serving in the country.

"It's worked marvelously since I've been here," says Lemil Speed, principal of Woodlawn School in Northeast Portland. "They're affectionately called the grandmas. They help the students you know can make it if you have another 15 minutes, another half hour in the day."

To Strong, visiting Portland recently on a tour of Experience Corps programs, there is enormous potential in the baby boom generation. In fact, the potential is almost as big as the problem.

"Fifty percent of some of our populations are dropping out of school," says Strong. "The children of this generation will have a higher dropout rate than their parents. They'll be the first generation ever" to hit that landmark.

The best way to do something about that, as a lot of people have noted, is to get to kids early, before the gaps in their reading levels separate them permanently from the kids who are going to make it.

"You do an intervention with a second-grader, you're changing direction on a speedboat," Experience Corps quotes Harvard School of Education professor Catherine Snow, "but when you do an intervention with a fifth-grader, you're changing direction on an oil tanker."

Which is why having somebody come in, several times a week, to read with a second-grader veering off course is a pretty good investment.

To Speed, it helps kids hit benchmark levels. Strong sees some other advantages.

"It's the impact of hope on children," says Strong. "The kids are eager. They know the time they spend with their tutor is all about them. It's showing the child that they matter."

And for achieving that, Strong said --in words that these days baby boomers are yearning to hear --"age is an enormous asset." In guiding the way through consonants and vowels, he notes, older people bring patience and life experience.

A recent study of Experience Corps from Washington University of St. Louis found that students in the program do 60 percent better in reading comprehension and sounding out words than comparable students. The study also concluded that being in the program produced benefits comparable to having a 40 percent smaller class size.

It's part of why the Portland program, overseen by Metropolitan Family Services, is funded by the Northwest Health Fund and the Children's Investment Fund, a voter-created initiative to support proven children's programs. The money covers training and a \$250 monthly stipend, covering volunteer costs such as transportation and lunch.

The record shows considerable potential for the program. So does the supply of possible volunteers.

"There are 78 million baby boomers moving toward retirement," Strong points out. "They're the best-educated generation in history. They're not ready to retire. They want to do something."

And in the Serve America Act, the feds have just provided another incentive, letting older volunteers earn college benefits for children or grandchildren.

Then there's the other benefit, the one that Strong has seen in his own life:

Treating a kid as if he's important can make it turn out that way.