



Mastering the printed word

by Amisha Padnani

Months after Ganiyu Akinola was hit by a car, his mother watched him lose interest in his schoolwork.

Instead of picking up his school books, he would plop down in front of the TV, eyes glued to Hannah Montana, said his mother, Ibidunni Silver.

"He was in a coma for three weeks," the Port Richmond resident said. "I really wanted him to catch up on things."

But last week presented a different scene, when Mrs. Silver proudly talked about her son's progress after he spent the summer reading at PS 20.

"Now he picks up newspapers and he reads everything on TV," she said. "'Jeopardy' is his favorite."

Last week, Ganiyu and about 30 other children at the school graduated from a program offered by the READ Foundation, a Manhattan-based nonprofit. The organization conducts programs in nearly 300* schools across the city and is slowly expanding to Staten Island. Summer and after-school programs are currently offered at PS 16 in Tompkinsville and PS 31 in New Brighton, as well as PS 20, said Lavinia Mancuso, director of program development.

The program is geared toward kids in kindergarten and first grade to help them get ahead before they can fall behind, she said.

"These kids don't have a history of failure or anything, so now is the time to intervene and get everybody reading," Ms. Mancuso said.

The students are tutored by volunteers from area high schools who provide one-on-one sessions for three and a half hours everyday during the summer and 90 minutes three to four days a week during the school year. Children read out loud to their tutors and follow individualized plans based on their progress. Sometimes, they'll also do an art project relating to a story they read that day.

"You go along at your own pace, starting exactly at the right level and chugging along," Ms. Mancuso said.

At last week's graduation ceremony, a group of tutors clapped and cheered as students were called to the stage for their certificates.

They said they enjoyed working with the students because they felt they were making a difference -- not just as teachers but as role models, especially for non-native English language speakers and children from troubled homes. Many said the program also helped improve children's self esteem.

"They need somebody to give them the attention they always wanted," said Elizabeth Sims, 16, a senior at Port Richmond High School. "We all know what they went through and it helps them to know there's someone who understands them."



Photos by Irving Silverstein / Staten Island Advance



Teens lead... Children read

*300 schools is a mis-representation. READ does work in partnership with hundreds of schools, however, our actual programming runs in approximately 50 schools across the five boroughs.