

Nonprofit helps teachers sow the seeds of reading

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By Clare S. Richie

Nearly 200 metro Atlanta public school teachers head back to their classrooms this month equipped with the knowledge and tools to help struggling readers, thanks to training and support coordinated by an organization called Reading is Essential for All People, or REAP.

For about \$1,000 per teacher, more than 100 students will be reached. And the number of students reached

increases as trained teachers mentor their colleagues. The more funding REAP receives, the more public school teachers can receive multisensory training by national experts, and the more children will learn to read.

Teaching students to read is not one-size-fits-all. For children with dyslexia, attention challenges and lack of early exposure to books — the “whole language” approach that focuses on recognizing words as whole pieces of language — doesn’t work for everyone.

And years of public education budget cuts have left little or no funding for teacher professional development. That helps explain why nearly two-thirds of Georgia’s fourth-graders are not proficient at reading.

The nonprofit seeks to build student reading proficiency by giving public school teachers the “how” they need to reach every reader. In 2013, husband and wife Jeremy and Jen Rhett founded REAP along with close friend Carla Stanford, a first-grade teacher, with a focus on literacy.

Jeremy watched as three generations — his father, brother and sons — faced obstacles to reading because of dyslexia. The difference today is that there are effective methods of teaching that work not only for Jeremy’s sons, but for all students.

“We train teachers to see what each reader needs and move forward with a multi-sensory approach using whatever curriculum kit they have,” Stanford said.



REAP co-founders Jen and Jeremy Rhett.

With support from individuals, businesses and foundations, REAP is ready to facilitate training and support by national experts for as many metro Atlanta public school teachers as its funding will allow. For 2015, REAP received 216 teacher applications, but less than half were accepted due to funding limitations.

REAP selects its trainees based on their experience, application detail, grade level and colleague referrals. “Our focus is on first- and second-grade teachers, but we recognize that teachers in third, fourth and fifth grade need this training, too,” Jen Rhett explained.



REAP co-founder Carla Stanford teaches a class.

Participation is a commitment: 30-hour or 70-hour sessions offered nights during the school year or during the summer.

Recent trainees are the best marketing for the program. “I now understand how to diagnose and meet the specific needs of struggling readers,” one shared.

“Every time I finished a class, I couldn’t wait to get back to my classroom to teach what I had learned to my students,” another added.

REAP also provides ongoing support once trainees are back in the classroom. They are looking into assigning literacy experts to schools with trainees to offer “shoulder-to-shoulder coaching.”

Another goal is to advocate for colleges and universities to include this training as part of a future teachers’ required coursework.

For more information about REAP, visit strugglingreaders.org.

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