

# MAKING AN IMPACT

## *Through HCF Grants*

### **Mentors + Fun = Learning**

More than 70 kids in grades 1 to 8 are learning, completing homework, making new friends, and developing a commitment to education through a program at Welcome Inn Community Centre. Their mentors are 150 volunteers from McMaster University.

Students from the two elementary schools in the program, Bennetto School and St. Lawrence School, have some disadvantages to overcome. They live in poor neighbourhoods and 50 percent have moved at least once in the past few years. About 30 percent don't speak English at home. They are academically "at risk" with difficulty reaching provincial standards. Some have repeated grades and the grownups in their lives often don't have the academic skills to help them: one-quarter of adults in the community have not completed grade 8 and almost another third have not completed high school.

Without some extra help, these children's life chances are bleak.

That's where the LAF (Learning and Fun) after-school program comes in. The volunteer mentors, mostly McMaster University students, pick the children up from school. They walk together to Welcome Inn, where the volunteers and students work together one-on-one for part of the time, and then participate in a group activity. Nutritious snacks are provided by the Optimist Club of Hamilton. Each grade level comes twice a week, and the program runs Monday through Thursday.

Students enrol in a specific track (reading, math, homework) depending on where they need the most improvement. Their mentor works with them on their problem areas, using flash cards, games, computer software, and Welcome Inn's library of books. At the same time, the university students are role models – the children see the benefits that a commitment to education can bring.

"One of the children I had the privilege of working with was Jordan," says a LAF volunteer mentor. "One area that she needed to work on was reading. I remember how in the beginning she would struggle to get through a simple book and it would be such a great moment when she finally got to the end. For me, it was a moment of pride when Jordan and I finished her first chapter book by my reading one page and she read me the next. It was great to be involved in such concrete moments of success."

The children are equally enthusiastic. "This is way more fun than I thought it would be," said one student. "I wish I could live here."

### *How HCF is Helping*

- *HCF has invested heavily in strengthening Hamilton's after-school network. In 2005, the Foundation convened the city's programs in a series of forums, starting with one featuring McMaster child development expert Dr. Gina Browne. The convening work spawned a city-wide organization, School Age Solutions, to help after-school programs share knowledge and resources. Experienced programs are now mentoring start-ups.*
- *HCF grants to a variety of after school programs, including LAF. LAF and Welcome Inn Community Centre have been supported by the Tackling Poverty Together initiative of the Community Fund, The Edith H. Turner Foundation Fund and the Mayberry Family Fund.*

## Some Key Elements of Successful After-School Programs

- They are based on recognized best practices.
- There is an ongoing commitment to evaluation.
- Barriers such as cost, transportation and accessibility are addressed, so that all children can participate.
- They have caring, supportive staff and volunteers who build relationships with the children/youth.

The results of LAF are evident. The program began in 2000 and teachers have been noticing improvement ever since: in a recent year, reading improvement in 72 percent of kids, writing improvement in 75 percent, and strength of confidence in 72 percent. Students are assessed at the beginning of the academic year and then again at the end.

After-school programs of all kinds have powerful benefits. According to the U.S. organization *Afterschool Alliance*, studies show that students involved in after-school programs get better grades, attend school more and have improved behavior. They express greater hopes for the future and more interest in school. Teens in after-school programs are less likely to skip class, use drugs, smoke, drink alcohol or engage in sexual activity.

Welcome Inn Community Centre, which offers LAF, is a charitable organization with Mennonite roots. It provides programs for men, women, children and seniors in the inner city of Hamilton.

### *Who Wins with LAF*

- *After school programs keep children safe, help working families and improve academic achievement.*
- *Children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods improve their academic skills and prospects.*
- *Volunteer mentors gain useful teaching and coaching experience.*
- *Schools and teachers gain more motivated and successful students.*
- *Families see improved academic achievement and socialization in their children.*
- *Children have a safe place to go after school.*
- *After-school programs provide healthy role models and help keep kids out of trouble.*