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Santa Fe youth literary program Reading Quest presenting method at England conference

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Student Camilla Marquez Rico high-fives Reading Quest Executive Director Rayna Dineen while playing an educational board game Wednesday at the Reading Quest center. Reading Quest, a Santa Fe literacy nonprofit, will be presenting at the World Literacy Summit in England next month.

Javier Gallegos/The New Mexican

Kasey Rivera, 9, spent Wednesday morning reading about a narwhal.

With some help from Avery Armstrong, a reading specialist, Kasey breezed through the book, sitting on a couch at the headquarters of Santa Fe-based literacy organization Reading Quest. Occasionally, Armstrong paused Kasey as she read aloud to ask comprehension questions or revisit a word.

But there's a big difference between Wednesday's Kasey — who could read out complicated narwhal facts with minimal help from Armstrong — and the Kasey who first arrived at Reading Quest.

That Kasey lacked the confidence to read aloud.

“They've changed a lot about me,” Kasey said of the Reading Quest staff. “I used to be so nervous about reading out loud. And now, I can do that without even being nervous.

“I love this place. It's one of my favorite places in the whole world. If I could be anywhere for the rest of my life, it'd be here,” she added.



Student Kasey Rivera, 9, practices spelling her name in American Sign Language with the help of reading specialist Avery Armstrong on Wednesday.

Soon, Reading Quest will showcase one of Kasey's favorite places in the whole world to the whole world.

Each week, the organization serves 440 young readers in Santa Fe and West Las Vegas, N.M., largely at no cost to students and their families. In April, Reading Quest staff members will make a presentation at the World Literacy Summit in Oxford, England, to an anticipated audience of more than 40,000 people around the globe.

The presentation, Armstrong said, will show the international literacy community the “magic” baked into Reading Quest’s method.

“What makes the program really special is A, we use the science of reading, but B, we make it really fun and engaging,” said Reading Quest Executive Director Rayna Dineen.

Reading Quest’s trained staff leverage the science of reading — a pedagogical model based in explicit and systematic instruction on elements essential to reading, like phonics, comprehension and phonological awareness.

Dineen said it essentially gives students an outline of the “rules of reading” and how to apply them.

“All kids can succeed in reading when they’re given the right support,” she said.

And the science of reading seems to be the right support. Since 2020, the learning model been included in the state Public Education Department’s best practices for improving student literacy, particularly among biliterate and dyslexic students.

But beyond acquainting students with the rules of reading, the program also strives to create an atmosphere where reading is encouraged and enjoyable, Dineen said.



Reading specialist Avery Armstrong puffs her cheeks while reading a book about narwhals with Kasey Rivera, 9, on Wednesday at the Reading Quest center.

Javier Gallegos/The New Mexican

Upon learning to read 100 new words or finishing 10 books, students “level up,” meaning they get a certificate, a prize from the organization’s treasure trove and a new book to read.

Tutoring time revolves around playing games, too. As they played a board game together, reading specialist Hugo Castaneda Serrano and student Daniel Castaneda, 10, occasionally paused play to read and write words from flash cards.

Reading Quest staff members develop trusting relationships with their students, Armstrong said. The tutors ask what books their students are interested in, what television shows they like, what they want to be when they grow up.

“A lot of kids spend time feeling embarrassed or nervous about their reading ability, but we show them that, more than anything, we care about them. And then, hopefully, they’re not so nervous when they read with us,” Armstrong said.



Reading specialist Hugo Castaneda Serrano, right, reads with student Daniel Castaneda, 10. They played a board game and occasionally paused to read and write words from flash cards.

Javier Gallegos/The New Mexican

Students seem to feel it. Before reading words like “insightful” and “disruptive” from advanced word cards, Camila Marquez Rico, 10, said she always feels welcome at the Reading Quest hub.

“It’s a safe place where, if I share something private [with the reading specialists], I know that they’re going to keep it between them and me. No one else,” she said.

The organization’s unique combination of fun and phonics works, Dineen said. Assessment data from students at Nina Otero Community School in Santa Fe and Luis E. Armijo Elementary School in Las Vegas collected after one semester in the program show growth far beyond the expected level.

First graders at each school, for instance, improved their test scores by an average of 48 points at Nina Otero and 29 points at Armijo, when anticipated growth averages around 12 points.

This level efficacy — and encouraging enjoyment in reading — is what the Reading Quest staff said they hope to show colleagues from more than 85 countries at the World Literacy Summit in April.

Reading will be a “passport to the future and the world,” Dineen said — for the organization’s staff and students alike.

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Reporter