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Learning their lessons

By **Anthony Colarossi** | Sentinel Staff Writer

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In a corner classroom at the John H. Jackson Community Center in Orlando, Cryshona and her younger brother Tobias are learning their lessons for a foolish mistake -- by improving their reading skills.

Last July the siblings from Pine Hills decided to walk out of a sporting-goods store with new Reeboks on their feet. They hadn't paid for the shoes, and a customer exposed the shoplifting.

Soon, Cryshona, 16, and Tobias, 12, were standing before Circuit Judge Jose Rodriguez. Not knowing what the punishment for their crime would be, the brother and sister soon learned they were "Sanctioned to Read."

Their sentence is to spend evenings after school being tutored and completing a series of tests designed to boost their vocabularies and reading comprehension.

"Honestly, the whole court situation made me scared and made me not want to do anything [criminal] anymore," Cryshona said.

Getting sentenced to read, however, hasn't been so bad, she said.

"I like it. I think it's helpful," she said. "During the time we're here, it keeps us out of the streets."

Officials in the 9th Judicial Circuit started the Sanctioned to Read program in September with an elementary premise: If kids read better, they will do better in school. They also will be less likely to skip classes and get into trouble.

Officials invited the Orlando Sentinel to see the program and meet some of the participants, on the condition they not be fully identified.

"The ultimate goal is to improve the reading level of these kids, raise their self-esteem, so, hopefully, they can do better in school," Rodriguez said. "Remedial education in reading might affect these kids' performance."

Educators point to a direct correlation between juvenile crime and poor grades. A child's reading abilities are directly related to grades because those skills help students excel in all subjects.

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Chief Circuit Judge Belvin Perry noticed the correlation and pushed to get the program started. With a budget of about \$125,000, Sanctioned to Read falls under the Teen Court program. It costs parents nothing.

"We want to break the cycle and give children the opportunity to succeed in school and in life," Perry said in an e-mail statement. "This program is designed to supplement and reinforce what is being taught in the school system. It is critical that children understand the importance of reading."

Officials with the Department of Juvenile Justice say poor school performance is one of four indicators that lead kids into the court system. They are not aware of many other formal, court-administered reading programs in Florida.

"Hopefully it will get replicated," said Juvenile Justice spokeswoman Catherine Arnold.

More than 20 children who committed petty thefts, batteries and drug offenses have been referred to the program. Many more are expected. Children incarcerated in juvenile detention are not eligible for the program, but once they come out of detention they may be referred to the program.

Meanwhile, administrators hope to open more tutoring centers in other parts of Orange.

Nothing about the brightly lighted room at the Jackson Center suggests that this is a place kids go when they get in trouble with the law. Two small tutoring tables, shelves full of reading and testing materials and phonics equipment make up most of the room.

"It's just a different setting, a different environment," said Irene Bustamante, juvenile-justice coordinator. "The kids know we're here to help them. Even if they're not in school, it's definitely going to help them with their life skills."

But it's all business when the children show up for the lessons. If they continually miss the sessions, they can be brought back to court on a probation violation or a contempt of court charge.

"We do have a hammer," Rodriguez said. "The moment somebody does not perform, we are notified, and we will take action."

As the kids progress through the testing, they are rewarded with credits that can be cashed in for items such as T-shirts, small remote-control cars or compact discs.

Bustamante says the court's reading initiative isn't an indictment of the school system; if anything, it's a supplement, she said.

"I don't think the schools have a bad system, but there's a lot of kids that fall through the cracks," Bustamante said. "The kids we're trying to save are already in the judicial system."

In many cases, a judge determines whether a child is eligible for the program. As soon as a child is referred, specially trained court officials spend two hours testing to determine the grade level at which the student is reading. This allows them to tailor a reading program for the individual. All children must complete 40 hours.

Bustamante and Lora Doncsecz-Horton, the reading program coordinator, say private reading programs can cost parents \$25 to \$30 an hour. Those costs are out of reach for most students coming into the program.

Doncsecz-Horton and tutor Josann Fernandez work with the children. For now, there are never more than six students in the room during the one-hour sessions.

"When you only have six kids at a time, you can bond with them more and get to know them better," said Doncsecz-Horton, a certified teacher. "The student does the work and then we review it with them. You're not going to get that in the classroom most of the time."

One 16-year-old student, Robert, entered the program with less than a 6th-grade vocabulary level and less than a 5th-grade reading comprehension level. But Doncsecz-Horton said he has shown improvement with each session.

"He's gone up one level in his vocabulary," she said. "I cannot wait until he gets done with the 40 hours, and I test him again and say, 'Oh, yeah, it does work.' "

Robert, who is in the program because of a drug charge, travels from Apopka by bus to get to the Jackson Center.

"This is my third week. It's all right," Robert said. "It helps me out a little bit. Now I can read good."

A mother whose son walked out of a store with a pair of earrings said her 10th-grader, Al, should gain from the extra reading sessions.

"He's not a bad child. Sometimes he just makes bad decisions," she said. "I hope his reading improves. I hope he matures. I just want the best for him."

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