



City Year volunteers lend hand to schools

By BETH LaMONTAGNE HALL
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MANCHESTER -- John Hathaway's work at Parker-Varney Elementary School includes much more than helping students with their homework.

On a Wednesday morning earlier this month, Hathaway was focused on keeping third-grade teacher Sarah Brancone's students on task. As Brancone worked with a group of students in the back of the room, Hathaway roamed from desk to desk, helping students on their worksheets, addressing a pencil that needed sharpening and even bending down to tie a student's shoe. It seemed like the moment Hathaway finished with one student, a flurry of hands shot in the air, demanding his attention.

As a City Year corps member assigned to serve at one of the city's lowest-performing schools, Hathaway is working to lift student reading and math skills.

The City Year volunteers believe that by reaching children who lag behind in the third, fourth and fifth grades, they can offer those students the skills necessary for them to perform better in middle school and eventually graduate from high school.

Hathaway, who grew up in Stratham, splits his days between working with the whole class and conducting targeted student mentoring. Working in small groups lets City Year volunteers help students the moment they start struggling with a new assignment, he said.

"I can take one, two or three kids to the back table and I can do the same lesson (the teacher is) doing," said Hathaway. "Certain kids do better in a one-on-one setting. It's good to reinforce the lessons because if they hear it multiple times, it really clicks for them."

Hathaway said it's this personal time with students that really makes volunteering worthwhile to him.

"It's definitely the one-on-one time you can spend with the kids because you can really connect with them," he said. "These kids are really awesome."

This year marks a major expansion in City Year's presence in Manchester. Once only at Hillside Middle School, there are now 50 City Year volunteers stationed in five Manchester elementary schools.

A volunteer's day begins before school, greeting students as they arrive and sometimes joining them for a game of foursquare on the playground.

Once the first bell rings, volunteers head to their assigned classrooms, where they work alongside the teacher. At the end of the day, volunteers begin their after-school program, which includes not only help with homework, but craft activities and team-building games as well.

Britt Langston, a volunteer from Washington State, loves working with her fourth graders because they're still excited about school. Keeping kids engaged and excited is important, she said. If they develop a positive attitude toward school, it keeps them coming back.

"As a teacher, it's really hard to get to all 24 students," said Langston. "They really want to show off their work. When we're excited about their writing, they get excited about their writing."

Walking down the hallways of Parker-Varney with a City Year volunteer, it's easy to see how popular these young people have become. Kids usually smile when they see the red jacket, offering up a hand for a high-five.

Travis Bourque, a fourth-grader at Parker-Varney, said he's glad to have City Year in his school.

"My favorite part is that they get to help us out," said Bourque. "They're a lot of fun. We do a little hangman or try to make as many words out of a word as we can. I like that. It's fun."

Third-grader Tatyana Ileri also has fun with the volunteers.

"They help us learn and help you do homework and they help you learn words," said Ileri. Her favorite City Year activity is "PT," or the physical exercises corps members do each morning with the students.

"It helps you get your day ready," she said.

Beyond academics, the work City Year does has also helped with classroom behavior and atmosphere, said Hathaway.

"Some kids, the only side of their teacher or the only side of school they see is them getting yelled at," Hathaway said. "We might not yell at them, but we do some small discipline stuff, then 20 minutes later we'll be out with them playing basketball. They can see both sides of us."

"Sometimes if a kid is misbehaving in class we can discretely whisper to them, 'Hey don't do that,' and give them little pushes," he added. "If you nip the small things in the bud we can improve overall classroom behavior."

Both Langston and Hathaway said their career goals have been influenced by their time with City Year. Hathaway, who has worked with children for three years, said he hopes to come back to the program next year in a leadership position. Langston said she sees a teaching career in her future.

"I want to be a teacher and am going back to grad school to get a master's in education," said Langston. "I love being in the classroom all day. (City Year) is a good experience and indicator of whether I want to do this, which I do."