

Volunteering Educators, Educating Volunteers

Educator Rene Holtzman needs no convincing that volunteers working with students make a difference. As a veteran educator at the Albert F. Argenziano School, Ms. Holtzman has worked with many weekly community volunteers over the years, and witnessed the strides students make when paired for individualized reading support.

“I’m convinced that the number one reason for these students’ higher growth is the one-to-one intervention provided by volunteers. Our newcomer English Language learners who spend extra time conversing and reading with an adult, particularly with an adult in their first language, show greater improvement over the school year. It’s the reason I say yes to volunteers working in my classroom.”

Rene also volunteers her own time to meet with newly referred volunteers, to ensure they have what they need and to share students’ learning goals. She insists that the extra work is worth it. “Volunteers working with students doesn’t involve a lot of extra time for me as an educator. We have volunteers who want to serve so I plan for it now. I try to make sure they’re engaging with students in ways to help move them along.” Rene designates a place in her classroom solely for this intervention with a table set aside for 1:1 reading and conversation. Emerging readers are paired with volunteers for 1:1 weekly reading, usually for 20 minutes per session.

Developing yearlong relationships with community volunteers has been an added bonus to Rene’s daily teaching, and mutually rewarding for volunteers. One such community volunteer is Megan Breakwell Smith, a new mom who had moved into the Argenziano School neighborhood and was looking to volunteer in her new community. As an educator (MEd., K-2) Megan had been looking for ways to connect with early elementary grades students while transitioning to motherhood. “I missed teaching, so this was the perfect way to keep working as an educator and spend time with some wonderful students. I’ve learned so much from Rene, she’s an incredible teacher.”

Now in her second volunteer year (and recently a mom again), Megan’s volunteering has allowed her to try out things she wasn’t able to as a full-time educator. “The work I can do with students at the Argenziano School are things I seldom had time to do as a full-time teacher with a larger class. All the one-to-one interactions that are so essential I now get to do. I’m so grateful to be able to spend time this way.”

SPS strives to connect educators with volunteers to enhance and enrich student learning. Visit <http://www.somerville.k12.ma.us/district-departments/volunteering> for more spotlights and resources.

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Educator Rene Holtzman, Volunteer Megan Breakwell Smith