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Retired principal takes on low graduation rates

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It's a picture-perfect afternoon, but for 13 students from Cedar Valley Community School, Alderwood Middle School and Lynnwood High School, playing outside will have to wait. It's Tuesday, and for the next three hours they'll be hitting the books with a teacher and student volunteers at the Lynnwood apartment complex where they live, a 240-unit building restricted to tenants who earn 60 percent or less of the area's median income. They are "KITE kids" — Kids in Training to Excel — participants in a twice-weekly tutoring program for sixth- to ninth-graders.



Retired Principal Jan Link works with Carlos Escutia, an eighth grader at Alderwood Middle School.

The best part? It's free, thanks to Mukilteo-based Academic Link Outreach (ALO), the brainchild of Jan Link, a retired Snohomish County high school principal whose name gives ALO a double meaning. She and her tireless staff create essential links between school, home and students with "outside the school day" programs. The links are intended to hammer away at Washington's 38 percent high school drop-out rate — 43rd highest in the country according to a recent report by Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. ALO's ultimate goal is for all students to graduate high school and emerge prepared for college or the workforce.

Link started KITE with a \$10,000 grant from Snohomish County Federated Health & Safety Network. Other sponsors pitch in for computers, school supplies and the all-important snacks that are appreciatively gobbled up the moment students hop off the bus and stream into the community room at Whispering Pines Apartments.

KITE teacher Ned Daniels is a former Boeing purchaser who earned a teaching certificate and master's degree 14 years ago and now substitutes for middle and high schools in Edmonds School District. His style is low key and supportive.

"All day teachers are telling them things," said Daniels. "I'm here to make sure it's a safe learning environment and answer questions. KITE provides a place where the first thing they do when they come home from school is sit down and do homework before they go out to play."

Middle school years critical

Although Link spent her 36-year career in elementary and high schools, she now turns her attention to middle-schoolers, a group she affectionately refers to as “squirrels.”

“Right when these kids naturally become squirrels, we push them into having five teachers, which can overwhelm them,” she said. Attitude can also be a problem. Link said middle-schoolers often think grades don’t count and have a false belief their grades will change in high school.

That’s where programs like KITE come in. Much more than a study group, the students are taught skills that will help them in high school and college, such as how to monitor their grades and be self-advocates. Link talked about one student who discovered she had done her math homework correctly on scratch paper but made a mistake copying it. With her KITE tutor’s encouragement, she showed the work to her teacher and received credit.

Daniels and Link encourage their KITE students to think about the future and that means registering for College Bound Scholarship, a program that promises free tuition at Washington state public universities and colleges to low-income students. Qualifying students sign a pledge in eighth grade to stay out of trouble and maintain a C average through high school.

Link also plans to fund an “Investment in the Future Study” of vulnerable fifth- and sixth-graders. They would be given outside-the-school-day support and followed all the way through high school. Link’s hope is to show that intervention just prior to entering middle school, along with continual monitoring, is a protective measure against dropping out of high school.

In the meantime, Link and her ALO staff are on a quest for donations and sponsors so KITE can be replicated throughout Snohomish County. Her eye is on a large apartment complex that is home to as many as 70 seventh- and eighth-graders. She’d like to see KITE go state-wide so that “every apartment complex in Washington has a study table.” Churches and community sites work too, said Link, but closer to home is better because transportation isn’t needed and students can safely study where they live.

At 68, Link doesn’t see herself slowing down any time soon. “You need a sense of purpose. When you lose your sense of purpose in life, you can go downhill really fast,” she said.

Academic Link Outreach is in need of donors, qualified tutors and adult mentors. For more information, visit www.academiclinkoutreach.org or call (206) 314-6500.

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