

Adventures in Reading, Risk and Reward

It's two weeks into the Horizons summer learning program and reading specialist Trish Athey is concerned. Jerzie Thorton, a third grader reading at first-grade level, is struggling. What sound does "CH" make? Jerzie shakes her head, looking puzzled. She reads a few words, sounding out "cloths" for "clothes" and "sprayed" for "spread."

"I'm asking them to climb a pretty big mountain," says the 22-year-old Athey about the 10 students she tutors one on one at the Radcliffe Creek campus. "When they come in, they shut down. They know they're falling farther and farther behind. The only ground we've met on is working on their weaknesses. It's killing me. It's a six-week program. All I have is six weeks. We can still make some gains – and we will celebrate them. But it's tough going."

Athey pauses, then says: "I can tell you right now I don't know how it's going to turn out."

During the first tutoring sessions, Jerzie is unmotivated and unresponsive. Then Athey learns Jerzie loves softball, a game changer as it turns out. For every phrase Jerzie works through, she gets to throw a tennis ball—16 phrases, 16 throws. Athey brings in a story about baseball. Jerzie perks up. Three weeks in, Jerzie raises her hand and volunteers to read aloud in class. Next, she announces to her teacher that she'd like to read a 16-line poem called "Weather" at the closing day awards assembly.

Jerzie still isn't comprehending stories right away but she's getting better at word-by-word decoding. A skill like reading requires a lot of repetition and Jerzie is lucky that her grandmother, with whom she lives, supports the reading initiative at home. During the bus ride to the pool three times a week for swim lessons, Jerzie saves the seat beside her for Athey.

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Ellen Uzelac

Jerzie Thorton and Susan Athey

"I feel like I'm teaching the way I was meant to teach"

Joyful learning, joyful teaching. If you had to describe the Horizons program, that comes close. Why? Unlike in the regular classroom, Horizons teachers are encouraged to be nimble, to innovate, to take risks.

As Pre K teacher Suzette Kelly puts it: "During the school year, everything is so scripted. There's no room for spontaneity, imagination or understanding. Without having the bells we live our lives by in school, you can flow."

What does that look like? In Kelly's classroom, kids wrote sight words in shaving cream and used marshmallows to count sounds. "Play is so important for this age. It's their job," says Kelly. "They need to learn to relax and get along with others. Play is how you do that."

Cheryl Fracassi took a detour when she realized her 13 second graders didn't know how to practice gratitude. "They were so mean to each other at first," she said. "And that social piece is so important." The new theme for the class? Acts of kindness. One girl made bracelets for the whole class. Another brought popcorn in to share. During a field trip in Philadelphia, the kids gave their lunch

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Horizons HEROES

Horizons of Kent & Queen Anne's wishes to recognize those Horizons Heroes who have supported our work with donations of \$1,000 or more in the last year. Our thanks go to:

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By the Numbers

41	\$2000	85%	\$35	501
Kids waitlisted	What it costs to support one Horizons student	Student retention rate	Fee charged per family per child	Acts of kindness executed by 13 second graders at Radcliffe Creek campus



Ellen Uzelac

PRE K GOES TO THE KENT COUNTY FAIR. Field trips are an important part of programming at Horizons because of the new vistas they open up. Students this year visited the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, the Naval Academy in Annapolis and the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, among other venues.

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“Yes, she still has a way to go, and no she’s not reading on grade level, but she’s making strides,” says Athey. “And building a relationship with her has been great. She smiles now. She’s excited. I’m hoping, thinking, praying she will make some more progress. She’s my buddy. If I lived here, I’d offer continued tutoring. It’s hard to think I might not ever see her again. I feel we’ve made a connection. So many of these kids, that’s what they’re actively looking for: a connection.”

Testing at the conclusion of the Horizons program shows that Jerzie’s reading level jumped from one to 1.2—representing a gain of two months in five and a half weeks. (Her math score showed a gain of three months.)

The day before the awards assembly, Jerzie steps up to a podium to read the poem that starts out:

Weather is hot
Weather is cold
Weather is changing
As the weeks unfold

“Watching her read the poem at rehearsal, feeling her nervousness as well as her commitment to persevere through it, was such a reward,” says Athey. “When she returned to her spot with her class, I watched her visibly relax and saw a tiny smile break out—she was so proud of herself.”

—Ellen Uzelac

Students Meet “Red Kayak” Author

When Horizons middle schoolers read “Red Kayak,” it was the first time many of them had read a book cover to cover. Another first occurred this summer when students had the opportunity to meet author Priscilla Cummings, who wrote the young adult novel.

“Red Kayak” resonated with the kids in part because it takes place locally. “I liked that it was local,” said sixth grader Keith Butler. “I liked how it took a while for Brady to figure things out.” The story of loyalty, choices and courage is told from the point of view of 13-year-old Brady Parks, the son of a Chesapeake Bay waterman.

“The best ideas come from just looking around you,” said Cummings, who got the idea for the plot line after reading a tragic article about two young Eastern Shore kids who took a canoe out in rough weather. When her son attended The Gunston School, Cummings became familiar with the Corsica River, where the novel unfolds. “Red Kayak” is the first in a trilogy.

Cummings also shared her own experience as a middle schooler. She said she had low self-esteem and struggled because her parents had divorced and sold the farm she loved. Reading and writing were her outlets.

Not only did “Red Kayak” resonate with the kids, so did its author.

In letters to Cummings later, students wrote: Thank you for your inspiration. Thanks for telling us about your hard middle school life. Thank you for going back and writing another book. Thank you for showing us you have an awesome and creative mind. Thank you for how you used writing to get through the tough times in your life. Thank you for the story behind “Red Kayak.”



Author Priscilla Cummings answers a question from sixth grader Keith Butler.

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leftovers to a homeless man. “Thank you,” he said.

In all, the class logged 501 acts of kindness. “We’re so used to being on script. It’s nice to be able to take a complete left turn if I need to take a complete left turn,” says Fracassi. “If you’re kind, everything else falls into place. I’m more proud of this than I am of their reading and math scores.”

And, in James Macedo’s third grade class, the kids tried—and failed—to make clouds. “It didn’t work and we talked about why,” says Macedo. “And that was okay. I feel like I’m teaching the way I was meant to teach.”

Teachers are also tasked with creating a safe space for their Horizons charges.

“These are the kids that don’t get the mental health support. They’re the kids that don’t get tutoring. They’re the kids who don’t get special ed,” observes Bibi Schelberg, site director at the Gunston campus. “It’s just the population; it’s not their fault. But it is a challenge.”

“We want to provide a lot of experiences for these kids but what they need the most is to have trusting relationships. That’s often what is lacking. Kids need to know that they will be welcomed every day, that we will have lunch for them every day, and that if there’s a problem we will talk about it and come to a resolution,” she added. “Every day is about consistency. They need to know that no matter what, you will make things okay.”

One boy in Fracassi’s class had attention issues—and was just putting in time. “By the end of the summer, he called me Mommy by accident,” she says. “That’s praise. He felt safe.”

Macedo worked with a boy who initially was hesitant and mischievous. During the school year he shuts down. At Horizons, he thrived. “They feel safe here,” he said. Toward the end of the six weeks, the boy told Macedo: “I don’t want it to end.”



Teacher James Macedo with third graders.

BIG data *yield* BIG results

Horizons students are tested on their math and reading skills at the start and finish of the six-week learning program. But what are the kids actually learning, day in and day out?

“We live in a world of big data,” says math specialist Marlene Vosburg, who taught the 11 third graders at the Radcliffe Creek campus this summer. “Why not use it?”

Vosburg, an educator for 44 years, tracked her students’ reading and math skills in real time across the six weeks using a free software program called MobyMax. Each child would read stories (or be read to) and solve math problems on a tablet. Vosburg would then collect the data points: How many minutes did the child spend on the story? How focused was she? How many questions did she answer successfully when quizzed about “Jessie and the Gnome” or “Can All Birds Fly?” The kids could even log in at home.

The idea behind MobyMax is that gifted kids can move on as quickly as they like while remedial students get the extra instruction they need. The stories get more complex and the questions harder as a student progresses.

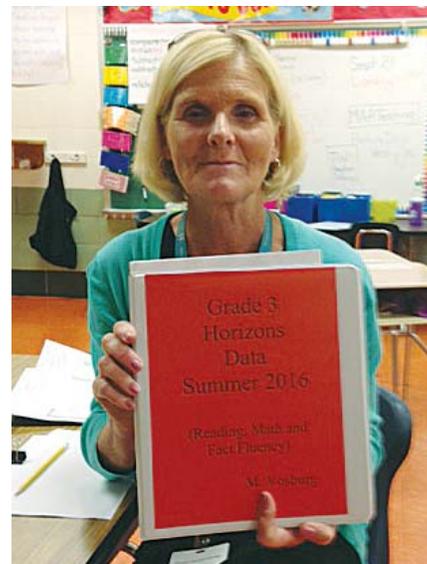
Based on the data, Vosburg divided her students into three groups according to ability. Each group, as an example, was given printouts of stories that accommodated their reading skills. In the classroom, low-level readers got the extra attention from Vosburg that they needed while high-level readers took turns reading aloud

with a partner.

“I try not to always focus on the top kids. We all have our strengths and weaknesses,” says Vosburg. “Everybody’s not good at everything, but there are strategies you can learn to be successful.”

At the end of the Horizons program, Vosburg collected the data in a bright orange binder. The results? Every third grader improved their reading skills – one girl by more than a grade level. Math scores either stayed the same or showed modest gains. Best yet, no student experienced the academic summer slide that many low-income kids struggle with when the school year is over.

“Third grade is big,” Vosburg says. “If we don’t nail them now to read and do math, they’re just going to get further and further behind. This is an opportunity to help get it right.”



Marlene Vosburg

Ellen Uzelac