Imagine a second grader who doesn’t know the alphabet while his peers are already reading. It hardly seems possible. But sometimes kids fall through the cracks if they don’t get the attention they need.

A group of Ohio State students are trying to reach out to young children like these. AmeriCorps for Math and Literacy offers academic help to children in some Columbus schools. Most of its members are OSU students. The program is in its third year of service.

AmeriCorps members work individually or in small groups with kindergarten through second-grade pupils who need extra help in reading, math and science.

Jason Colon, a senior majoring in Spanish, is a member of the program who works with first-graders on reading.

"We give surveys to the children to evaluate their progress," Colon said. "Then we pick four focus children. From there we work with them on literacy and we try to incorporate math and science."

The program serves in Highland and Avondale Elementary schools on the city’s west side and Beck Elementary School in the German Village, Colon said.

Children are assessed at the beginning and end of each year to see if the help is making a difference, said Colleen Griffiths, a graduate student in education who is a trainer for the program.

"Our results show the children do make progress," Griffiths said. "The parents feel very grateful."

The program hopes to introduce a new literacy kit with reading activities that children can take home and do with their parents, she said.

Students who want to become members must go through an application process involving transcripts, reference letters and an interview, said Janet George, program coordinator. At least one year of college is required.

"The members are doing great," George said. "We have people with a high level of commitment. We ask a lot of our members."

Griffiths said members complete two weeks of training before school starts in addition to training sessions which occur throughout the year. Her role is to go into the schools and support the members.

"It’s just seeing each year the new group of members and to see their sense of accomplishment when they see children succeeding," Griffiths said. "That’s very rewarding to know our program has an impact on people."

Members are compensated for their service. Part-time members serve 900 hours in a year to receive $2,363. Full-time members receive $4,726 for 1,700 hours of service, George said.

The money never reaches the members’ hands. It is an award that can only be used for college tuition or to pay back student loans, George said.

Those involved with the program say they have received other benefits.

"Showing them they are capable of doing whatever it is they thought they couldn’t do," Colon said. "(I like) seeing their expression. It’s tangible right there in front of me."

The only two other sites in the nation that have AmeriCorps for Math and Literacy are The University of Texas at Austin and California State University in San Bernardino, Griffiths said.

George said despite attempts by lawmakers to cut federal funding, the program is set until 1998.

"It’s my personal opinion that AmeriCorps has proven its worth and will continue past ’98," she said.
Photos by:
Nancy Otte

Story by:
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Left: Amy Slack comforts Chris Barrett while Jenifer Wise asks what happened.

Bottom: Amy Finnerty helps first-grader Joshua Gray construct his Halloween mask during the overnight.
die Reese, a first grader at Avondale Elementary School shows off the Halloween mask he created during an ernight activity.
Americrop worker Jane Stump helps Benjamin Eason read during school hours.