

# Bus drivers go into the classroom

## Adopt-a-School program helps students with reading skills

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN  
Staff Writer

Eight-year-old Johnathan Paulino can recognize and pronounce most words at his reading level, including 'pretty', 'every' and 'know'.

As he hesitates on 'now' (know?) 'saw' (sow?) and 'our' (oar?), schoolbus driver Dalene Smeets asks Johnathan to sound out the words and repeat them once again, encouraging him with a whispered comment, "You're doing awesome."

In the hour they spent together at Ashton Meadows Public School in Markham Tuesday morning, Johnathan read Smeets several books, ran through a stack of vocabulary cue cards three or four times, and shared countless smiles and giggles.

It's part of the York Region District School Board's Adopt-a-School program, now in its third year, where businesses and community groups are urged to build a volunteer support network in their local schools.

Smeets is a driver for Gormley's Stock Transportation, which has 10 employees participating in the program this year.

She spends an hour or two in the school library every other week reading with kids at all reading levels.

"It's a very positive feeling and I enjoy working with the little ones," Smeets said.

Johnathan interrupts: "How come you have gold hair? Mine's brown."

"And it's very curly," replies Dalene patiently before continuing her thought. It's nice for the children to have one-on-one time, any child enjoys that. Sometimes they can get lost in the numbers," she said.

Stock employees help out at six public schools across the region, including Crosby Heights and Oak Ridges public schools in Richmond Hill, Joseph A. Gibson and Michael Cranny in Vaughan and Ashton Meadows and Armadale in Markham.

The grass-roots program began three years ago when director of education Bill Hogarth encouraged his own staff to get involved at the individual school level.

"I wanted to folks to have a sense of what was happening in schools," Hogarth said.

"I asked them to spend two days a month in schools, or whatever they could manage given their work load, and they got first-hand exposure working with kids."



STAFF PHOTO/SIOERD WITTEVEEN

Stock Transportation schoolbus driver Dalene Smeets helps Johnathan Paulino, 8, a grade 3 student at Ashton Meadows Public School in Markham with his reading in an "Adopt-a-School" program by the York Region District School Board. She spends an hour or two in the school library every other week helping children.

More than 30 board employees are still involved in schools right across the region and Hogarth said he chats up the program in the community every chance he gets.

"We try to have folks work with the same students or make a commitment to the same routine," he said.

"Some do graphic arts, some do literacy programs and reading, some help students with process writing — there's a range of time and skill depending on the skill sets and given what people are interested in."

Ashton Meadows vice-principal Judy MacLachlan-Dow explained literacy is a major focus for Ashton Meadows and many other Performance-Plus schools across

the region.

They're schools with special challenges; many English-as-a-Second-Language students, families facing economic problems, diverse cultural backgrounds within their individual school communities.

*"The on-going message is that adults make a difference in the lives of young people..."*

"Many children come to school with no pre-school background and we're trying to level the playing field," MacLachlan-Dow said.

"Volunteers come in on a regular basis and it's a wonderful way to reinforce those skills."

"It's invaluable because some children have fewer opportunities to read with an adult at home and they need the practice."

The consistent one-on-one program gives students a comfort level they may not have in an ordinary classroom setting, she added.

"It adds quality to their day and quality to their education."

Joan Down, Stock Transportation's operations manager, said her company promotes community involvement among employees and the Adopt-a-School program is tailor-made.

"Our commitment is to give back to the educational communi-

ties we serve through programs which benefit children by helping them to grow and learn," Down said.

"To see the little kids' eyes light up when they're making progress is a really good feeling."

"Our staff has become passionate about helping kids — and hopefully next year more employees will come on board."

Hogarth hopes are the same.

"We will continue to encourage our employees and encourage volunteerism in a number of different ways," he said.

"We welcome folks in the classroom. The on-going message is that adults make a difference in the lives of young people and the more they are involved, the better our schools are."

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