

IT MATTERS WHO'S READING



MEGAN FARMER/THE WORLD-HERALD

The Real Men Read program has expanded to Howard Kennedy Elementary, where volunteer Willie Hamilton got Mary Lehr's Head Start preschool class fired up Tuesday.

Kids who
lack male role
models light
up when Real
Men Read

BY ERIN DUFFY
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When Willie Hamilton sat down Tuesday to read "I Know a Wee Piggy," a book about a mischievous pig who romps through tomatoes, cotton candy and milk during a day at the fair, his audience — Head Start preschoolers at Howard Kennedy Elementary — stuck to the

perimeters of their classroom carpet, still a little shy.

By the end of the story, they had crowded around his chair and were shouting out the names of colors as he read them aloud.

"If you don't get reading now, it's going to be so hard for you later on," he told the class. "Reading is fundamental, and it's fun. It takes you anywhere

you want to go in your mind."

Hamilton is the executive director of Black Men United, which started the Real Men Read program at Mount View Elementary in 2010. Now, the group is expanding the program to Howard Kennedy, where 40 men have signed up to read in classrooms twice a month.

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Their message is a familiar one: Reading is the foundation of all learning.

But the person reading to kids matters, too. The program aims to get more men, especially black men, into schools and in front of kids, some of whom are lacking male role models.

"Probably half of my kids have dads who aren't active in their lives," pre-K teacher Patty Lyons said. "There's not a lot of males in education. This is a good opportunity for them to see dads, grandpas, uncles who read."

Hamilton used a booming voice as he read for the morning pre-K and Head Start classes. He asked the kids questions as he went along, earning him applause in Mary Lehr's Head Start class.

In one class, he read a string of nursery rhymes: Jack and Jill; the Itsy-Bitsy Spider; Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater.

"What do you think he liked to eat?" Hamilton asked.

"Pumpkin pie!" preschooler Marcus Lu piped up.

Hamilton took preschool non sequiturs in stride.

"I have a cat — two cats!" one boy yelled in the middle of a story about a cow.



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Howard Kennedy preschoolers Alissa Paw, center, and Camila Dominguez-Ruiz, right, applaud after Willie Hamilton read to them Tuesday.

Some kids are surrounded by female family members and caregivers, Hamilton said.

"When a man walks into a school, he's like a star to those kids, because they don't see a lot of men," he said.

While volunteer readers include parents, community members, even players from the Omaha Beef indoor football team, Hamilton said they want more fathers, uncles, grandfathers or other family members

to sign up and visit classrooms.

"The statistics speak for themselves," he said. "When a father is involved in a kid's life, they're less likely to join a gang get a girl pregnant. We want more men to take an active role in their child's life and be a mentor to these kids."

To sign up to be a reader, email will@blackmenunited.org or call 402-965-1003.

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