

Hooked on books

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By Clive McFarlane

Telegram & Gazette Staff

WORCESTER--About 6:30 p.m. on a recent Tuesday, Margaret Manoogian trudged up the stairs of a three-decker at 30 Northampton St. and paused in front of the third-floor apartment.

Before she could knock, the door swung open to the squeals of 8-year-old Annesah M. Nevins, her 4-year-old sister, Janell, and her 2-year-old brother, Tyrel. "Peggy!" they shouted, giving Ms. Manoogian big bear hugs. "We knew it was you."

"I am sick," Janell confided to her as the door closed behind them, shutting out the cold winter evening air.

The children and Ms. Manoogian tumbled into the living room where a well-decorated Christmas tree sat blinking in a corner.

Ms. Manoogian held out a book titled "The Trucks."

"Look what I have for you," she said to Tyrel. The boy's face lit up like one of the Christmas bulbs. He reached for the book.

Tyrel's mother held her son and sat beside Ms. Manoogian on the sofa.

Ms. Manoogian began to read the book, pausing every once in a while to answer Tyrel's questions or to congratulate him on his observations about what he was seeing and hearing.

In many ways, the scene that evening was reminiscent of a favorite relative visiting for Christmas.

Ms. Manoogian, though, isn't related to the Nevinses. She was the bearer of a gift she hopes will keep on giving -- the service of a national initiative that helps the children of at-risk families develop critical language and literacy skills.

Called the Parent-Child Home Program, it serves more than 3,000 families across the country, nearly half of them in Massachusetts.

Some 145 families are being served in Worcester.

Ms. Manoogian works with the children in six families, starting with the children at their second birthday and staying with them for two years.

During those two years, she visits with each family twice a week for 23 weeks each year. She reads to the children and provides the parents with a range of educational, visual and intellectual materials to help stimulate the children's learning.

Mothers are expected to work with their children between the home visits and to eventually continue their literacy development skills when the two years are completed.

"It is a delight to work with these children," Ms. Manoogian said. "The families are very committed. They want to work with the children and are willing to take the time, effort and commitment to improve literacy skills."

Sarah E. Walzer, the executive director of the program, said that each year thousands of students arrive in kindergarten lacking basic skills and unprepared for the structured learning environment.

"Given the new federal mandate of testing children every year, it is important to remember that you are not going to see children do well on those tests until families are given the resources and the opportunities to help their children learn," she said. "It is very hard to catch up in third grade."

Studies of the parent-home program suggest that it is having an impact.

A comprehensive study, released in 1998, which followed a group of Parent-Child Home Program participants through high school, showed that the students, on average, performed better than students of similar socioeconomic status who did not participate in the Parent-Child Home Program.

Participants in the Parent-Child Home Program graduated at a rate 20 percent higher than other children in their socioeconomic group, or at the same rate as middle class students, Ms. Walzer said.

"This is a real cost-effective program," she said.

Massachusetts state officials apparently share the same opinion. The state poured \$3 million into the program last year and upped the ante for the program by \$346,305 this year.

The home-based parenting program was one of the few state-funded grant programs that survived the ax in the state's effort to make up a \$1.3 billion revenue deficit.

The Worcester public schools launched the Parent-Child Home Program in 1997, using federal and private grants to fund it for the first three years.

The infusion of state funding last year allowed the district to enlarge the program by subcontracting with Edward Street Day Care Center to provide additional literacy coaches.

This arrangement allows Ms. Manoogian, one of five literacy coaches working out of the Edward Street Day Care Center, to interact with families later in the evening than the district's parent liaisons.

Besides the Edward Street literacy coaches, the Worcester public schools have 24 parent liaisons who make home visits.

However, home visits are just part of the comprehensive early childhood program that serves some 700 families in the city, according to Rosemarie Franchi, director of the city's Head Start program.

Based on income-eligibility guidelines, the city provides these families with preschool services and a host of other programs that run the gamut from medical and social assistance to parenting skills and GED preparation, Ms. Franchi said.

The city's Head Start childhood development program this month won a "Program Excellence Award" at the annual New England Head Start Regional Conference.

The award was one of only five handed out to the more than 100 programs that comprise the New England region.

"It says a lot about the quality of our program and the dedication of our staff in meeting the needs of children and families," Ms. Franchi said.

Worcester educators acknowledged, however, that the home visits are one of the most crucial components of the city's early childhood program.

By getting to children and their parents that early, educators are able to nurture the kind of relationships that lead to greater academic achievement for the students and a greater likelihood that the parents will be more involved in their children's schooling and education, according to Joan Fitton, acting director of the city's Title I program.

"The program works on the concept that we need to value parents as the first teacher of their children, and this approach is a very nonthreatening way to get parents involved," she said.

Laurie J. Dinsdale, the regional coordinator of the program, said that while the Parent-Child Home Program generally serves low-income families, the Worcester

model also tries to help working parents such as the Nevinses, who have very little time to spend with their children.

At the start of the program, parents are asked to sign a contract that they will allow the regular home visits for 23 weeks during each school year and that they will supplement those visits by reinforcing the skills that their children are learning, she said.

"It's only going to work if the parents carry it through," Ms. Dinsdale said. "The parents know that, and that is why the program works."

Tyrel's mother, Shanneka K. Nevins, was told about the program by a friend who had had success with it.

Ms. Nevins, a teller at a local bank, she said she was hard pressed to find the time to have one-on-ones with her children.

She said she figured the program would force her to sit down with her children, but she had no idea the kind of results she would get from just putting aside a half-hour each day, she said.

"When we started the program, Tyrel really didn't speak," she said. "He was very withdrawn and shy. After the first three or four sessions, his vocabulary picked up, and he became comfortable with Peggy. They started to bond. From there he came on tremendously."

Tyrel, she said, was not the only child benefiting from the program.

When Tyrel began the program, his oldest sister was behind grade level, prompting the family to get her a tutor.

However, she quickly began to emulate her mother and Ms. Manoogian by reading Tyrel's books to him and doing the puzzles that come with the program.

"In a couple of months she made a big jump and started reading at grade level," her mother said.

As for Tyrel?

"He is going to be brilliant," his mother said. "The other day I asked him for something and he told me it was probably in the kitchen. Probably, that was a new word for him. He is soaking everything up."