

## Students get taste of working world

A Richneck Elementary program lets them juggle class assignments and campus jobs.

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NEWPORT NEWS - — The halls of Richneck Elementary School bustled with activity on a recent Wednesday morning.

Students wearing latex gloves pushed brooms along the tiled floors, catching the stray autumn leaves and bits of paper in their paths. Other students scurried to and fro with stacks of paper destined for the school's recycling bins.

A money-saving ploy? Punishment? Child labor?

None of the above. The students were among more than 142 who belong to the school's Achievers R Leaders program, in which students apply for and take on jobs in the school.

Richneck started the program last year, with 94 fourth- and fifth-graders, said coordinator Robin Ebaugh, who teaches kindergarten. Most of the participants are older students, but some second-graders were "hired" as kindergarten lunchroom monitors.

Ebaugh said the program provided benefits to the school and the students. "They were really performing important jobs," she said.

"There is an air of responsibility," Principal John Tupponce said.

Dominique Waters, a member of the school's safety patrol, agreed, saying he and his fellow leaders are proud of what they do.

"I wasn't doing anything in fourth grade but my work, and I felt I needed to be active," he said. "In my essay, I said I needed to be active and to do something to help keep people safe."

It's a tough job, he said. Six students help make sure that others safely get to their buses. He's become sharp-eyed about safety hazards like untied shoes and is working on his communication skills because "not too many people listen."

The program is designed to give students a taste of the world of work: applications, interviews, responsibilities and the challenge of juggling academic assignments with work-related tasks. Students fill out job applications and must list experiences, both in and out of school, that show their ability to handle leadership responsibilities. Teachers are asked to rate the students' responsibility and classroom behavior.

Based on the application and teacher recommendation, students are "hired" for one of 13 jobs, and they must keep up with classwork and maintain good grades and attendance.

If they slip, they find themselves on probation and risk losing their jobs.

Most students spend about 45 minutes once a week at their jobs, while others — such as those on safety patrols or lunch monitoring assignments — might work every day. The largest of the job categories is teacher's helper, with more than 62 students, one assigned to each teacher in the school.

Tupponce said the program dovetailed with the division's Career Pathways initiative, aimed at helping students explore potential jobs and understand the links between work and academics.

"Our job is awareness," he said. "We make kids aware by doing things like real-world folks do."

Marlaysia Tucker, 10, a teacher's assistant for a kindergarten class, said she applied for her job because she wanted to be a teacher. "I wanted a job where I was with kids and helping others," she said. "It has helped me learn how to be a teacher."

The program teaches the "soft skills" — punctuality, responsibility, teamwork, problem solving, communications and creative thinking — employers want but educators find hard to fold into academic lessons and harder to assess on standardized or other classroom tests.

Tupponce said students also learned about their role as citizens in the community through the recycling program and the school's food bank Fridays, when students bring in donations.

Katie Hebert, 10, works on the food bank team, which collects and weighs the donations each Friday and keeps track of classroom donations.

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"I think my job helps other people who are in need," she said. She hopes to work in a field that assists people when she graduates from high school.

Dominique, Marlaysia and Katie said they worked hard to keep up on assignments because they didn't want to lose their jobs.

"You have to be really responsible and keep up your grades," Marlaysia said. The others nodded.

Dominique said he focused on getting things done on time. "I just do it," he said.

Katie said students learned what happened when co-workers missed assignments or were absent. "One time, I did basically all of it," she said of the Friday that she was the sole member of the food bank team.

Tupponce said the program enhanced the climate of the school. Discipline referrals are down more than half from last year, and student attendance and achievement are up.

The halls are noticeably neater, the adults said. "The students police each other," Tupponce explained.

Parents with children in the program strongly support it, according to last year's parent survey results. Parents said their children felt more connected and took pride in their school. One mother said her child had been difficult to wake but that once the student had a job, the problem vanished.

Even the second-grade lunch monitors have had an effect. Ebaugh said they helped kindergartners with milk cartons and encouraged the younger students to keep the cafeteria neat.

"The children have more ownership," she said. "It's their school."

### Learning responsibility

Students in Richneck Elementary's Achievers R Leaders program perform these jobs: safety patrol, recycling collector, teacher's helper, breakfast line helper, newsletter columnist, food bank donation collector, photojournalist, bus dismissal helper, grounds and building monitor, library book helper, guidance helper, P.E. helper and kindergarten lunch monitor.

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