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Engineers Pushing Students to Read? Efforts Boost Kids' Work, Mentors' Skills Too

Most mentors in engineering push kids to excel in math, science and technology so they can succeed in the field. But a Tuscaloosa, Ala., geotechnical engineering firm champions reading skills as its mentoring cause for young students in any career—and the effort is working.

Committed employees at TTL Inc. not only have helped raise stubbornly low reading test scores in several Southern-area elementary schools, they also have sharpened their firm's connection to local clients and communities as well as boosted their leadership and communication skills. Now the program is going national.

Dean McClure, president of TTL Inc., has involved company engineers in the reading mentoring effort, which is called the Accelerated Reader Program, for three years. It rewards students, mostly in low-income communities, with points for reading a book and passing a comprehension test. The students can redeem the points at school for educational and non-violent toys and games, such as play cars, bicycles, Nintendo Wiis and iPods.

TTL covers the cost of the incentives at a Tuscaloosa elementary school and others in Georgia and Tennessee, where the firm has offices.

Company volunteers help students select books on a wide variety of topics and interact with them to enrich the reading experience.

While education mavens still debate whether the use of such incentive-based programs work, school officials tout evidence that they do work. At Tuscaloosa's Martin Luther King Elementary School, the proportion of second-graders reading below grade level dropped to 70% from 95% in one marking period after mentoring began. Comprehension jumped to



63% from 43%. "Library checkouts increased dramatically, some 50% to 60%," says McClure. Tuscaloosa Schools Superintendent Joyce Levey says, "The passion and enthusiasm for partnership has ignited a love of reading for many young students."

Forest Wilson, a TTL vice president and one of 25 staff participants, says the program has boosted other skills. "As the year goes on, kids learn to save their bucks and work harder," he says. "It's a great lesson in American enterprise. We never envisioned that." McClure says the program

"was positive in the community, but also in the company."

In August, the Engineers' Leadership Foundation (ELF), Silver Spring, Md., announced

plans to launch engineer-led reading pilot programs based on TTL's model in Houston, Denver and Newark, N.J., by fall 2011. The effort by ELF, a not-for-profit group focused on honing engineers' leadership skills, is called Engineering Better Readers (EBR).

"Engineers solve problems, and we see a serious one that EBR can address," says



ENGINEERING READERS Reading incentive mentor program sponsored by TTL Inc. has boosted student performance, says President McClure (top).

ELF President Gerald J. Salontai, former CEO of Kleinfelder Inc. "Studies show that kids who do not master reading skills by the third grade are far more likely to drop out before high-school graduation. Also, the more kids see what engineers can get done, the more they will want to become engineers themselves."

EBR Director Patricia Bachner says, "[The effort] gets engineers into positions where they learn how to network and learn to be leaders." She says the recent \$100-million challenge grant to Newark schools by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has propelled school-district officials to accelerate EBR at one city elementary school, with \$5,000 in support and employee volunteers from Birdsall Engineering Group, Sea Girt, N.J. ■

By James Blum and Debra K. Rubin

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— FOREST WILSON, TTL V.P.