

Irvington School's Initiative

A few years ago, our Minister, Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern, gave a powerful sermon that people still speak about concerning the deplorable state of our inner city public schools in New Jersey. The basic thrust was that this was more than just an issue of funding budgets and motivating teachers. It was nothing less than a humanitarian crisis of the first order. Our children were being divested of their right to an education. As Unitarian Universalists, we needed to do something.

One of the members of our Social Action Committee was moved to action. This led to a dialogue with the Mayor who referred us to a particularly well-functioning elementary school called the Chancellor Avenue School.

Ultimately, the principal at Chancellor Avenue agreed to our starting a tutoring program in reading and math that would take place for six consecutive Wednesdays in the Fall and Spring.

One of our members took the lead in organizing and implementing what came to be known by our congregation as the Irvington Initiative. He was able to harness the efforts of the many talented members of our congregation to have the program supported, among many others, by members who were working teachers, supervising administrators and a Superintendent from another school system.

Many of the volunteers who performed the one-on-one tutoring with the kids were generally overqualified for the task. A striking example of this was one of our other members who had a Doctorate degree in education. He was employed as a consultant by the World Bank to study and implement educational programs in Third World countries. He ultimately brought an entirely new dimension to the initiative when he offered his services to review and analyze the standardized test scores at Chancellor Avenue and implement a special additional tutoring component to help increase them.

There was definitely a spiritual side to this initiative. One of the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism is to “affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” The Irvington Initiative was clearly in accord with that principle since it enriched our understanding of our neighbors – literally, since they were only two towns over from Summit – living in this challenged community.

Our congregation was incredibly supportive. We invited the Mayor to give a presentation at our Church, and we had over one hundred members in attendance. The tutoring was attended by dozens of members, many of whom were new faces. Once again, this initiative was so accessible that it was also a magnet for people who otherwise had not found their place in our congregation. It was an opportunity to breach the fourth wall, for the audience to come on stage and be part of the story.

The program has grown recently with the addition of a new initiative to tutor at-risk students for the NJ ASK standardized test. This was a result of our member who is a consultant for the World Bank conducting a statistical analysis of student-related data and using that analysis to identify ways in which we could be of most help in seeking to raise those scores.

We were particularly pleased that the result of last year's tutoring demonstrated a clear increase in those scores. Taking those results into account, we have refined and expanded the program of NJ ASK test tutoring in certain key areas, such as reading comprehension.



Principal Sandra Boone-Gibbs of the Chancellor Avenue School in Irvington is presented with a commendation in 2010 by the UCS Social Action Committee for helping to make the Irvington Tutoring Initiative a success.



Math and reading tutoring by the UCS Social Action Committee at the Chancellor Avenue School in Irvington, NJ



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