

Opinion Early intervention can make a big difference

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Columnist

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SPARTANBURG, S.C. — Two superstars recently converged in this upstate college and former mill town. One was New York Times best-selling novelist Mary Alice Monroe; the other was Meeting Street Academy, a sparkling downtown school for underserved children, where Monroe spoke to fifth-graders about her latest children’s book, “Search for Treasure.”

Monroe is no stranger to adult “beach” readers, though this designation is far too facile for such a mission-driven writer. Her books often take place in South Carolina’s Lowcountry, where she lives, and are concerned with ecology and conservation. After writing for adults for 20 years, Monroe decided to write for mid-aged children in hopes of capturing their imaginations about the environment. Through riveting stories that take place in fragile ecosystems, students become engaged with science and the fate of the planet.

Her simple message to the kids last Wednesday: “Less screen time, more green time.”

“Get to know your world outside,” she told the students, who had just finished her book, the second in a series. She spoke to them of common creatures they might run into — alligators, spiders, snakes — and encouraged them to learn their names. “When you know about them, you care about them,” she said.

Monroe was a good fit for the Meeting Street Academy, a hybrid, public-private school, that caters to children from “under-resourced” neighborhoods here, where the median income is \$12,745. Many of the children have experienced or witnessed childhood adversity, such as violence, drug abuse, divorce or economically challenged households that don’t offer much hope; 39 percent of their parents have not graduated from high school. The vast majority, some 80 percent, are single-mother households, and some moms are younger than 18. Eighty-eight percent are Black; 11 percent are White.

The Spartanburg school is modeled after the original Meeting Street Academy created by philanthropists in Charleston. These schools rely on a mix of public and private funds, technically public, but are given greater freedom to innovate. A local family fully funds the class for 3-year-olds in Spartanburg.

“If we can get them at 3, we can get them ready for kindergarten, which is so important for the foundation of their success,” said Kathy Dunleavy, community liaison for the Academy.

One year, she told me, three children ages 3 came to the school unable to talk. In their short lives, they hadn't learned a single word and could only point to what they wanted. By age 4, all were as chatty as the other kids in their class and were developing in the expected, age-appropriate ways.

Such miracles happen here every day, and it's easy to understand why. Children adapt quickly to exciting, often fast-paced classrooms where teachers not only are well versed in best practices but also integrate the school's "character curriculum," aimed at developing strength in grit, gratitude, optimism, empathy, citizenship, integrity, self-control and curiosity — all indicators for success in school, work and relationships, according to the school.

Academic achievement isn't a sidebar but a headline. Data shows Academy students scoring as high or higher than other schools, nationally and statewide, including some elite, private schools. During the 2020-2021 school year, students were in the 92nd percentile national ranking in both math and reading. In 2021, the Academy was one of 325 schools nationally to receive a Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Education Department.

Innovation in teaching seemed standard here, but one second-grade teacher was a standout. Of course, she was young, spirited and, apparently, inexhaustible. Speaking faster than I can think, she engaged every student at once with a continuous stream of rhythmic, song-like instructions and coaxes. In one breath, she called on a child to make the short-vowel sound of "e," while singing to another student, "check your body," a gentle prod to sit up in his chair. When a student didn't know an answer, everybody began churning their forearms in a circular motion to signal encouragement. Sign language is used throughout the day as a means of quiet communication that is also great fun.

Children wear uniforms consisting of colored T-shirts corresponding to grade level, and khaki pants. Each grade has a theme, and T-shirts bear an inspirational quote on the back by such writers as Oprah Winfrey and Maya Angelou. In addition to teaching, the school provides everything the children need, including meals and medical, dental and vision care, as well as counseling, tutoring and after-school care.

"If they need it, we give it to them," says Principal Kyndran Hilton.

Novelist Monroe marveled at her own response to the school. "What's going on at this school is life-changing for these kids. The positive energy, the overarching care for the child — from health care to involving the whole family — it just reveals that it succeeds. I'll return as often as they let me."

We all know the many challenges that lie ahead for all kids. But judging from the fifth-graders' enthusiasm, one could fairly deduce that they've already developed a love of reading and now, courtesy of the author, have a budding interest in the environment.

That's a good start.