

WORDS THEIR WAY: THE WELCOME PROGRAM AT FRESH YOUTH INITIATIVES

In Washington Heights, New York, where 48 % of residents are immigrants, the Welcome Program of Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI) provides a safe, joyful and enriching afterschool program for 120 immigrant and first-generation children in grades K - 5. The goals of the



Welcome Program Coordinator, Fatima Guzman, provides one-on-one time with a second grader.

program are to assist immigrants, mainly from the Dominican Republic, adapt to their new life, and to help all participants thrive socially and in school.

The Welcome Program is conducted at PS128 where in 2016, 23% of children met standards for the English state test – a fact that inspired FYI staff to join with the school’s principal and teachers to help every child become a skilled, impassioned reader. We decided to offer a balanced approach to literacy that would focus on oral language development, reading comprehension,

and writing. In our most recent instructional effort, staff were introduced to *Words Their Way* a

phonemic awareness curriculum that is now a feature of the Welcome Program.

For fifteen minutes daily, every child in the Welcome Program studies words by pronouncing and manipulating phonemes.

"What, you may be wondering, are phonemes?" Quick answer: they are the smallest part of spoken language. Phonemic awareness, which is different from phonics, is essential to proficient reading. We were surprised to discover that our kids love sounding out words and manipulating sounds -- their newest favorite activity!



Second grader, Greylin de Los Santos, practices her "short o" words such as mop, pot, and shot.

Program Director Sergio Bautista reports that *Words their Way* is an especially effective program for children who are learning to speak English. "Our children want to learn to pronounce English words," Bautista says, "and *Words their Way* offers a fun, stress-free opportunity to practice pronunciation without feeling self-conscious." Bautista noted that participants "make quick connections to word meanings and enjoy helping each other during this intensive 15-minute routine."



Two of our 4th grade boys, practicing words in the “families ending in sh” category such as rush, brush, and gush.

Eileen Lyons, the Executive Director of Fresh Youth Initiatives, credits Jennifer Collett, Ph.D., for guidance in crafting The Welcome Program’s language learning approach. Dr. Collett, a language learning professor at Lehman College, works closely with FYI staff to strengthen Welcome’s overall approach to literacy instruction and to implement a cohesive professional development strategy. Dr. Collett recommended Words their Way because it rounds out our other literacy activities – read-alouds and journal writing – and is well-suited to our cohort of emerging teachers who make up our staff. Dr. Collett earned her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, currently conducts research on education, led direct service programs in the Dominican Republic, and provides intensive consulting support to Fresh Youth Initiatives as a pro bono consultant.

Staff members administer an assessment that is included in the *Words their Way* curriculum enabling them to provide instruction tailored to each student’s level. They prepare for daily lessons by selecting sound groups/words that their students will practice – providing word cards with similar sounds that children repeat, shout and chant – and organize into phonemic groupings. It is a user-friendly curriculum, and teachers and group leaders report loving *Words their Way* as much as the kids do.

Eileen Lyons, the Executive Director of Fresh Youth Initiatives, credits Jennifer



Group leader, Shirley Estrella, reads daily to children. Extended activities include journal writing and art.

For more information about The Welcome Program, contact Sergio Bautista, Program Director at sbautista@freshyouth.org or Eileen Lyons at elyons@freshyouth.org .