

Ringling a BELL for Braille Literacy

by Natalie Shaheen

From the Editor: Natalie Shaheen, education program specialist with the NFB Jernigan Institute, offers the following report on the 2009 Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) program. Here is what she says:

In schools across the country low-vision students are commonly thought to be sighted children who don't see very well. Consequently these children are taught to read large print or standard print with magnification, no matter how slow and laborious this method may be. But low-vision children are not broken sighted children; they are blind children who can often benefit from Braille instruction.

To address the deficits in the Braille instruction of low-vision students in Maryland, members of the affiliate developed a program they named Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL). The Maryland affiliate implemented this program in the summer of 2008. The program flourished and was then adopted by the Jernigan Institute for further development and dissemination.

This past summer (2009) the national NFB BELL program was piloted in Maryland and Georgia. It targeted low-vision students ages four to twelve who would not normally receive Braille instruction because of their residual vision. It offered students two weeks of intensive Braille instruction through fun and interactive lessons. A core team of three licensed teachers of the blind (Paul Howard of Indiana, Jackie Otwell of Maryland, and Natalie Shaheen of Indiana) were responsible for the instruction. The core team traveled to the two host states to implement the program. The states handled the logistics, including securing meeting space, arranging transportation for students, and supplying all necessary instructional materials. The core team, state coordinators, and members of the Jernigan Institute's education team ensured the success of the program at each site.

The Georgia NFB BELL program ran July 13 through 24 and included five participants. The NFB BELL program in Maryland took place August 3 through 14 and had ten students. Students in both programs spanned the age range. Most of the students entered the program with no knowledge of Braille. A few had limited knowledge of uncontracted Braille. Even fewer had a cursory knowledge of contracted Braille.

Students attended the program for six-and-a-half hours each day. Daily instruction included blindness attitudes; tactile discrimination; Braille reading; Braille writing, including the use of the slate and stylus; and nonvisual techniques for daily living. Lessons in each area were made enjoyable by using games that demonstrated to the students how exciting Braille can be. Braille twister, Braille musical chairs, drawing with the Braillewriter, and the skit "Captain Whozit Saves the Day" were among the students' favorites. To ensure that students were honing their tactile skills and not using their residual vision, students often wore sleepshades during lessons.

The program also provided a great opportunity for students to interact with blind role models. Federationists in both states volunteered their time, assisting with instruction and taking the time to read to the students each day. The bonds formed between participants and volunteers were invaluable in shaping the students' positive attitudes about blindness.

Throughout the day students rang a bell to celebrate their accomplishments. At the beginning of the program the adults recognized the students' accomplishments and reminded them to ring the bell. By the end the students were pointing out each other's successes. Students rang the bell when they learned a new contraction, successfully identified a letter, used the cane to find a drop off, and realized that, by using alternative techniques, blind people can do the same things sighted people do.

Students in both states had a blast throughout the two weeks of the program as evidenced by their comments. A number asked the core team, "Can I do BELL next year?" When asked on the last day of the NFB BELL program if blind people can bake cookies, one energetic little girl responded, "Yes, yes, they can. I am blind, and I made cookies last week!" One of the older students said, "I like Braille. It is like a secret code!"

Does your state have low-vision students who need better access to Braille instruction? Do you want to help kids in your state get excited about learning Braille? Contact Mary Jo T. Hartle, director of education at the NFB Jernigan Institute, to inquire about bringing the NFB BELL program to your state. She can be reached at <[mhartle@nfb.org](mailto:mhartle@nfb.org)> or by calling (410) 659-9314, ext. 2407.