

YMCA goes on quest for quality child care

The YMCA is on a quest.

Last year, the Springfield Y enrolled 170 students in before-school care, and 370 in after-school care. The children were transported safely from 42 elementary and middle schools to six locations. They were given nutritious snacks, helped with homework, and guided by caring and capable staff members.

But like a brilliant coach after a rousing win, the program directors never stop trying to figure out ways to make the programs even better. They're on a quest for quality.

So what is the Y doing specifically to improve quality? They are taking part in a Department of Early Education & Care pilot which began last April and will continue through the school year. They're fine-tuning every aspect of these programs, from curriculum to staff development.

One primary focus is on behavior. Last spring, the YMCA received a \$78,000 state grant to improve program quality. In addition to purchasing new program supplies, educational materials and curriculum, the YMCA hired BHN (Behavioral Health Network) to work with the after school programs and design a behavior management and incentive program.



with CHeeRRs cards for displaying extraordinary Caring Honesty Respect & Responsibility. These cards may be redeemed for prizes and special activities throughout the year. The staff can also be recognized by parents and co-workers.

The staff attended a full day training in June and some of the camp programs piloted the program this summer. Additional training will be provided during the school year.

Another primary focus is on tutoring. Two types are provided in the after-school program. America Reads sends interns from area colleges to work with young-

The program is called CHeeRRs, which stands for "Caring, Honesty, Respect, and Responsibility," which are the four core values of the YMCA. During this year's before- and after-school programs, students will be rewarded



Submitted photo

Front row, from left, Juan Rivera, Lauryn Bethea and Michelle Senecal; back row, from left, Jaymarie Burgos, Melissa Carrasquillo, LyzMarie Loubriel and staff member Porsha Randall, all of Springfield.

sters. The interns are very popular with the children, who quickly bond with particular tutors and look forward to working with them. The college students are young enough to be like older brothers or sisters and are good role models for the younger students.

The other, more structured type of tutoring is provided by a Department of Elementary and Secondary Education grant. The YMCA partners with First Step LLC to provide free academic tutoring to kids in grades K-3 from underperforming schools. The tutors are sea-

soned public school teachers who counsel students twice weekly for 1.5 hours for 10 weeks.

Yet another focus is on curriculum. This year, more long-term projects and activities are planned, such as a weather program debuting soon in collaboration with one of the local news stations. WeatherBug is an online teaching tool that uses live weather data and images to engage students in learning. It's a way to improve student achievement in math, science, geography, technology and much more using the live weather readings from

the world's largest weather network.

Finally, the before- and after-school programs focus on staff training and professional development. Weekly leadership training is held for staff members. November 11 will be an all-day staff and service meeting featuring a hired speaker. Training is necessary for successful implementation of programs, but it has a secondary function. It delivers a personal benefit to the employees, helping them as individuals while making them feel more invested in their jobs.

Executive Director and Vice President Kathy Treglia is enthusiastic about enhanced opportunities for her staff.

"We're trying to give them ownership of the program so it's more than just a job. We are on a quest for quality, and everyone gets to participate."

The YMCA of Greater Springfield was founded in 1852 and is the second oldest YMCA in the USA. Some 30,000 members and program participants are served annually in Springfield, Wilbraham and 11 surrounding cities and towns.

For information on YMCA programs or how to get involved, call 739-6951 (Springfield Branch) or 596-2749 (Scantic Valley Branch), or visit www.springfieldy.org.