

FOCUS ON

The FLAME Mentoring Program: Real-life superheroes reaching out to Gwinnett's students

– October 1, 2014

Superheroes in movies, comic books, and television pull off spectacular acts of bravery in the face of danger. Most often, they are also guided by a strong moral character that influences those around them to do good deeds and be better people.

Here in Gwinnett County, we have our own real-life superheroes who stare down danger every day on the job just like the movies. The men and women who serve in the Gwinnett County Department of Fire and Emergency Services answer tens of thousands of emergency calls every year. Somehow, they also find time to serve as mentors to local school children through the F.L.A.M.E. Program.



Firefighters with the F.L.A.M.E. Program spend time with local elementary school students to provide positive adult influence

F.L.A.M.E. stands for the Firefighter Lunch and Mentorship Experience program. Battalion Chief Eddie Myers created the program after hearing about the need for positive role models in young students' lives from his grandmother, mother, and wife who are all educators. Through this program, firefighters visit local schools during lunch to share a meal, spend some time with the students, and provide a positive adult relationship. "I thought that it would make a difference for firefighters to actually sit with kids when they visit," said Myers. "They are right there with them during lunch instead of being seated separately with faculty or school administrators."



Students have demonstrated improved test scores and behavior since the program began.

F.L.A.M.E. works mostly with local elementary schools by request from the counselor's office. Visits can be focused on high-risk students to help positively influence their behavior or focus on ordinary students who may not otherwise receive a lot of extra attention. Students receive life lessons during these visits while learning about taking responsibility, having a good attitude, and being a good citizen. Firefighter participation is

strictly voluntary and personnel participate in the program while they're on call. "There has been terrific participation," said Myers. "If it weren't for these firefighters willing to be a part of the program, it wouldn't be possible."

After Chief Myers secured buy-in from his station and his supervisors, the program was piloted in spring 2009 at two elementary schools, Grayson and Craig. In 2010, the program expanded to include more schools. By the end of 2012, F.L.A.M.E. had won an Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties.

Most of the schools participating in the F.L.A.M.E. program are public schools, but it is also open to private institutions that may be interested. Future plans for the program include expanding into high schools. "I would like to add high schools and create something tailored for those who want to go into public safety as a career," said Myers.

Schools involved with F.L.A.M.E. have reported that student behavior and attendance drastically improve leading up to the visits. Test scores leading up to the mentoring events also improve because the students become excited and strive to succeed. Counselors who request F.L.A.M.E. visits inform the firefighters about any specific concerns that need to be discussed with the students. Each fire station is able to work with three to six students per visit although one-on-one or two-on-one meetings are available by request.

The program's reputation has spread across the nation. Other jurisdictions have begun expressing interest in creating similar programs. "Some agencies in the Midwest have expressed an interest in the program and requested information," said Myers.

To find out more about the F.L.A.M.E. Program, visit the Department of Fire and Emergency Services webpage at www.gwinnettcounty.com.