

Girls leadership program in Reading in growth mode

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By [David Mekeel](#)

READING, PA

As Daphne Klahr read the comments aloud, the impact was evident on her face.

"It's perfect."

"I wouldn't change a thing."

"It's made me a better leader and a better person."

The words of young girls touched by a special program Klahr holds close to her heart.

"Reading these, these are the kinds of things that make it worthwhile," Klahr, executive director of the Reading Recreation Commission, said of responses written in evaluations of the commission's girls leadership program.

"I wish I could deliver this program to every girl in the Reading School District."

Starting three years ago with a handful of young ladies meeting once a week at the Third & Spruce Recreation Center, the girls leadership program has begun to blossom.

First, it spread to a second club, at Southern Middle School. And this past school year a club at Northwest Middle School was added, thanks to a \$13,000 grant from the Berks County Community Foundation.

The idea behind the program is pretty simple - to teach leadership skills to Reading girls ages 12 to 17.

Using curriculum specially designed for Reading, the program focuses on topics like positive identity, self-expression, life skills, career development and life choices.

"It's part about giving back to the community, and part about becoming part of the fabric of life here," Klahr said.

The early success the program has experienced - it has received awards as a top recreation program in the state - has led to plans for even further expansion. The wheels are in motion to add a girls leadership group at Reading Intermediate High School next school year.



Reading Eagle: Bill Uhrich | Daphne Klahr, executive director of the Reading Recreation Commission, at the Baer Park Field House. Klahr has been deeply touched by the impact the commission's award-winning girls leadership program has had on participants.

"By expanding to the intermediate school, we're reaching another level of need," Klahr said. Klahr said the intermediate high school is the perfect place for the program, with girls from all over the city coming together at the same school for the first time in their lives. Having a program like the girls leadership group is a great way to help ease that transition, she said. Chris Celmer, Reading School District assistant superintendent, agrees. "Hopefully we can create a lot of energy at the intermediate school," he said. Celmer said the group is a great way to bring kids together and provide a sense of belonging, much like sports and music programs. "We see it with sports," he said. "But what about the other pockets of students in the city?" Celmer said the proposal for a group at the intermediate high school has not yet been brought before the school board. Klahr said the commission is still looking for additional funding to support the girls leadership programs, including the expansion to the intermediate high school. The Community Foundation has already said it will match its grant from last year, which will cover the program at Northwest. The commission has also received grants from Penn State Health St. Joseph to help fund the programs. Klahr said it costs \$8,000 to \$10,000 to run each site. But, Klahr said, the commission would still like to find a way to add a branch of the program at Northeast Middle School if the money for it can be found. Contact David Mekeel: 610-371-5014 or dmekeel@readingeagle.com.



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