

MASS LIVE

After school program Project Coach teaches students life skills through sport

Matthew Milano, MassLive.com Intern By **Matthew Milano, MassLive.com Intern**

on November 01, 2012 at 6:45 AM, updated November 02, 2012 at 10:51 AM



A high school student instructs elementary school students participating in Project Coach in October at the Chestnut Middle School gymnasium.

Photo by Matthew Milano

SPRINGFIELD — If you were to stop by the gym inside Chestnut Middle School just before sunset, you would find children in an after school program running around kicking soccer balls, yelling, laughing and learning.

Those more than 100 elementary school children, who participate in the uniquely-designed after school program called Project Coach, receive one-on-one tutoring with about 30 high school students and learn about sports in a safe learning environment.

The high school students — who come from Springfield's Central, Putnam, Renaissance, and the city's High School of Science and Technology — improve practical leadership skills that will prepare them for life after graduation.

For Springfield Central sophomore Xavier Rosario, Project Coach has been a large part of his life for some time now. Before becoming an active coach in the youth program, Rosario was a participant as a young child who looked up to his high school mentors.

"I know what they feel like and know what they can work on. When they tell me they don't understand something I actually know what they feel like because at the time I was younger I didn't get it, so I can teach them a little bit better," Rosario said.

The mission of Project Coach is to help students flourish in the classroom by learning specific lessons and values through coaching. The teachings of the program have a strong emphasis on leadership roles and youth development.

The project helps high school students learn what it means to be a role model from Smith College graduate students and complete school assignments with Smith undergraduate students.

Putnam High School sophomore and a current coach in the youth program Kiana Figueroa loves her time with Project Coach. "I really become a role model and a leader to them," she said.

Figueroa said she was strongly influenced by her brother's participation in the program when he was in high school.

"When Project Coach first started," she said with a bright smile, "my brother was one of the first to coach. When I was growing up, he kept telling me about it and because I liked to work with kids, it would be something I'd enjoy."

When the high school students first meet up with their elementary children from Springfield's Brightwood, Gerena and Lincoln schools, they go into a tutoring session and read books about sports.

"They get excited about the books for reasons related to sports and they also learn to love reading because they're watching these teenagers enjoy reading and learning from it as well," program director Kayleigh Colombero said.

After classroom time has ended, everyone heads into the gym for soccer games and drills. The younger children sit still, intently listening to their coach's directions and after everything has been explained, everyone huddles up to scream their team's name at the top of their lungs before bursting out into the gym.

Coaching all these children is no easy task for the high schoolers. Once the young children start to play, they play with the intensity only a child can muster up, darting around the gym as fast as their legs will take them, laughing with their high school coach who tries to play along and yelling as loud as they can for a chance to kick the soccer ball.

With the energy and excitement the younger children bring to the table every day, the coaches have to find a way to stay energized, too.

"This year, my goal for Project Coach was to be more enthusiastic while I'm running a game or coaching in a huddle just to bring more energy," said Figueroa. "My goal for school is to maintain my straight A's and to progress to a point to start taking college preparatory classes."

© 2014 masslive.com. All rights reserved.



Elementary school students participate in Project Coach in October at the Chestnut Middle School gymnasium.

Photo by Matthew Milano