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**Community News from the Study Hall**

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### **Community News from The Study Hall**

On a residential street in Atlanta's Peoplestown community, a visitor might notice a simple frame building that closely resembles the neighboring houses, although it is larger in size. Every day after school, school buses drive up to this building, and 90 elementary school children catapult through its doors. This marks the arrival of The Study Hall scholars, who have arrived for an afternoon of homework assistance, outdoor play, and a host of enrichment activities, followed by a nutritious hot dinner. This scene has repeated itself for the past 24 years, during which over 2,500 low-income children have been served by The Study Hall, created as a safe and happy place dedicated to their personal and academic success.

Founded in 1990, The Study Hall is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization providing affordable, quality after school and summer programs to K to 5th grade students attending Atlanta Public Schools in Peoplestown and surrounding areas near Turner Field. Programming is designed to meet the Georgia Performance Standards, and to supplement the education provided by Atlanta Public Schools. With a staff of four full-time and seven part-time employees, and a host of volunteers, The Study Hall expects to serve 150 students and their parents this year. The community served has many long-term residents and today, some of the program's graduates are now bringing their own children to participate because they have positive memories of their time at The Study Hall.

The Executive Director of The Study Hall is Jacquetta Watkins, M.Ed., who has provided leadership to the organization since 2002. A former banker, she first came to the facility as a part-time consultant and later joined the staff full-time. Ms. Watkins' decision to make this career change was inspired in part by her interactions with children who needed help to meet

challenges they faced outside the classroom in order to succeed in their academic studies. “We provide behavioral supervision and oversight to the children, whom we refer to as ‘scholars,’” she says. “We help them understand the consequences of different behaviors and teach them about accountability.” Without The Study Hall, many of the children would be unsupervised after school, putting them in a potentially unsafe situation or tempted to engage in risky behaviors. In some cases, older children might be tasked with the care of younger siblings after school, hindering them from completing their own homework. Because Ms. Watkins and her staff understand the issues facing the children in their home environments, they are equipped to provide a place for participants to interact with their peers by participating in an enjoyable yet challenging program that meets their specific needs.

The organization is located in the Peoplestown community in Atlanta. The Study Hall serves children from this area and several surrounding communities located in the City of Atlanta’s Neighborhood Planning Unit V. The city is divided into 25 Neighborhood Planning Units, or NPU’s, which are citizen advisory councils that make recommendations to the Mayor and City Council on zoning, land use, and other planning issues. Many parents of current or former scholars of The Study Hall view the organization as key to preparing the next generation to assume these responsibilities. By helping local children to succeed in school and learn important life skills, The Study Hall helps them become productive citizens who can make a difference in their community. In addition, the parents of participating scholars can focus on meeting their own work and school obligations, comforted with the knowledge that their children are in a safe, supervised environment receiving the help they need to succeed academically.

During the school year, staff members pick up and transport young scholars from five neighborhood Atlanta Public Elementary Schools (D.H. Stanton, T.H. Slater, Dunbar, Gideons,

and Neighborhood Charter School) to the campus. Then they are separated by grade level for their academic work. The children value the time they have for daily physical activity on The Study Hall's playground.

The Study Hall's activities are based on a five-point Scholar Model:

- **Academic Enrichment:** Staff members provide homework assistance, interactive tutorial lessons with special attention to literacy, and online educational games.
- **Cultural Enrichment:** Scholars are introduced to a wide variety of new experiences. Weekly club meetings involve participation in choral music, dance, arts & crafts, culinary arts, the sciences, and working in the on-site vegetable garden.
- **Financial Literacy:** Teaching financial skills helps the scholars overcome financial adversity later in life. The academic coaches engage the children in age-appropriate lessons in managing money.
- **Civic Engagement:** Children learn the importance of making a positive contribution to their community by participating in community service projects of interest to them.
- **Health and Wellness:** The scholars receive healthy snacks and meals, lessons on preparing nutritious meals, and daily physical exercise, including golf and swimming lessons during the summer.

The Scholar Model illustrates The Study Hall's multi-faceted attention to children's academic and personal growth and development. Each grade has an academic coach who, along with other program staff, spends up to 20 hours weekly with the children. By spending a significant amount of time with the young scholars, staff members are able to learn more about each child's particular strengths and challenges—both inside and outside the classroom—and are able to provide individualized support.

The Study Hall's staff members strive to have all the scholars reading at or above grade level. At the end of the current school year, they expect that at least 80% of the K-3rd grade students will read at or above grade level. As to overall academic achievements, The Study Hall's program staff members were proud to see that at the end of the past school year, all of its scholars advanced to the next grade. The long-term goal is to reduce the community's high rate of school dropouts. In one sign of progress toward this goal, The Study Hall's staff members recently celebrated with one family in which one of the organization's former students graduated college and applied to graduate school, while his sibling enrolled in technical college.

After the scholars complete their homework, they participate in literacy and other enrichment activities based on Common Core Standards. In one activity fostering literacy, children can earn "Scholar Dollars" for their achievements, which are exchanged for books they can add to their personal libraries. The children participate in a host of other enjoyable activities that are proven to help them practice their reading skills and enlarge their vocabulary. The Study Hall also keeps a lending library so that children and their parents can practice literacy skills at home. In addition, staff members are working with local colleges and community organizations to recruit volunteers to read one-on-one with the scholars. The children of The Study Hall have greatly benefited from the organization's longstanding partnership with the Urban Literacy Clinic and other programs at Georgia State University. Dr. Gladys Ross Yarbrough of GSU's College of Education serves on The Study Hall's board of directors as program committee chairperson and facilitates the partnership, helping program staff members stay abreast of best practices in literacy education.

For children requiring additional literacy tutoring during the school year, The Study Hall transports them once per week to GSU's Urban Literacy Clinic, and in summer, children visit the

clinic twice weekly to help them get a head start on the next school year. The children benefit greatly from the tutoring and also enjoy the experience of visiting a college campus, which provides them an opportunity to meet role models and visualize themselves as future college students. In addition, Georgia State University College of Education students often come to our facility to work with our young scholars. The Study Hall's Program Director, Lisa R. Holmes, M.A.Ed., states that "The children love being with the Georgia State tutors and getting one-on-one attention. They enjoy having new experiences and learning something new."

Introducing the children to new experiences is an important element of The Study Hall's programs. For example, Dr. Gwendolyn Benson, Associate Dean for School, Community and International Partnerships at GSU's College of Education, arranged for a group of 24 students from the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, to visit The Study Hall as part of their recent U.S. visit. The children heard stories of the visitors' homeland and in turn shared their stories and some of their favorite music with them. Other first-time experiences for the children have included visiting museums and art exhibitions, planting a community vegetable garden and watching the produce being prepared in the facility's kitchen, and participating in community service projects. These extracurricular activities expand the children's horizons, suggest potential career opportunities, and provide teachers with numerous opportunities to bring school lessons to life.

In 2015, The Study Hall will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. With support from Georgia State University and other community partners, the organization remains dedicated to the children of the greater Peoplestown area. By continuing to equip each child for sustained personal and academic success, The Study Hall's supporters expect that the next generation will shape a positive and healthy community.

**Author Bio:** Susan Butler Allison currently serves as Director of Development for The Study Hall. She holds a Master of Divinity degree (M.Div.) from Candler School of Theology at Emory University and a Bachelor of Business Administration (B.B.A.) from Oglethorpe University in Atlanta.