THE NATIONAL JEWISH
COALITION FOR LITERACY
NEWSLETTER

FALL

Litbits 2005

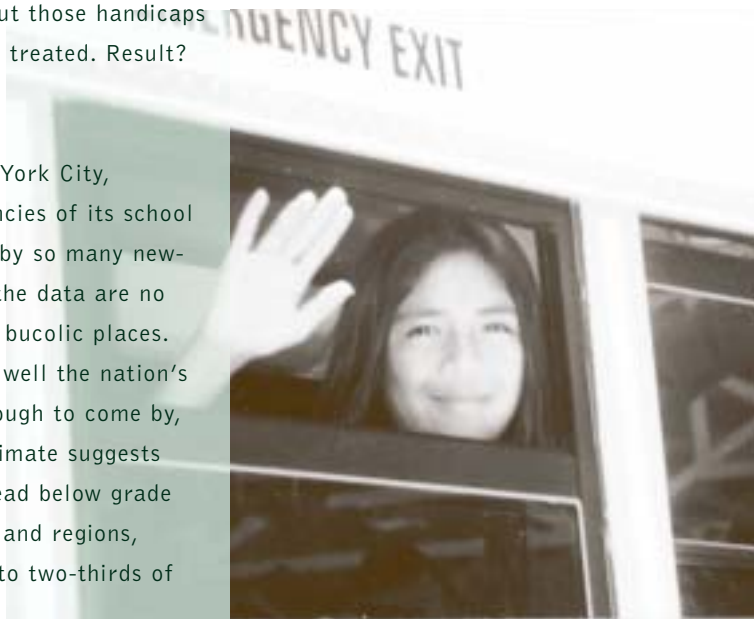
HISTORY AND HOPE

by Leonard Fein

...One child redeemed, and then another, one hope suddenly illuminated, and then another...

School people in New York City are in a celebratory mood these days, and rightly so: Citywide, 5th graders improved their reading scores on standardized tests by a whopping 19.5 percentage points. That is an utterly astonishing gain, and there is considerable ongoing debate regarding the multiple factors that seem to account for it – a reduction in class size, new support services, more testing, and more.

But the celebration, however warranted, is scarcely the end of the literacy story: While it is true that in grades three to eight, 51.8 percent of New York City's public school students performed at or above grade level in reading this year, that means that 48.2 percent were reading below grade level. One out of every two kids in the NYC public schools. (In fact, 8th grade reading scores declined.) Consider what that means to the high schools they'll be attending, to the city in which later on they'll likely be living and working. Above all, consider what it means to the kids themselves: They have crippling but treatable handicaps, but those handicaps are by and large not being treated. Result? Life, crippled.



Ah, you think: That's New York City, notorious for the inefficiencies of its school system, plus overwhelmed by so many new-comers to America. Alas, the data are no more encouraging in more bucolic places. A precise estimate of how well the nation's 4th graders are doing is tough to come by, but the persistent best estimate suggests that 40 percent of them read below grade level – and in some states and regions, the figure appears to rise to two-thirds of the children.

Is, then, our effort futile? Is the work of the NJCL merely yet another case of good and decent people tilting innocently – or vainglorioously – at windmills?

Seamus Heaney, the dazzling 1995 Nobel Laureate in Literature, near the end of his

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"The Cure of Troy," a version of Sophocles' "Philoctetes," offers these words of good counsel:

"History says, 'Don't hope on this side of the grave.' But then, once in a lifetime, the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

High sounding words, those, hard to put together with the tedious commute to a desolate public school filled with noisy and neglected children. Filled with frustrated teachers and flaking walls. Filled with hopelessness: No hope on this side of the grave, after all.

But here and there, and tomorrow more, a sliver of hope, one child redeemed, and then another, one hope suddenly illuminated, one and then another.

Until hope and history rhyme.

In the pages that follow, you will read of how people across this land persist in the belief, as Heaney puts it, "that a further shore is reachable from here" after all.

LEONARD FEIN IS THE FOUNDER OF NJCL.

HONORS

New Jersey's **Bergen County** JCL earned a Best Practices award from the United Jewish Communities at its General Assembly. The program, entitled "Bergen Reads," was among 20 from across the country chosen for this honor. The Massachusetts Literacy Champions Award was conferred on Sherry Comerchero, coordinator of the **Merrimack Valley** JCL. The honor provides a donation for the affiliate and a separate professional-development grant for speech-language pathologist Comerchero. The Virginia Mentoring Partnership named the **Richmond** JCL one of its two "Programs of the Year" and presented coordinator Miriam Davidow with one of its two "Individual Mentor of the Year" awards.

The **Bay Area** JCL was chosen by the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco as Program of the Year to receive a 2005 Award of Excellence. The **Atlanta** JCL is one of three organizations honored for volunteer service by The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. Sharon Horenstein, a reading mentor in the Elementary Express program of the **Hartford** JCL, won the Violet Richardson Award for young women volunteers. The honor, given by Soroptimist International of the Americas, includes grants forHorenstein as well as for the Hartford JCL.

ESTHER'S (BAT) MITZVAH:

ripples in the pond

What happens when a Bat Mitzvah girl in Brooklyn surfs the net, stumbles on the NJCL web page and clicks on "Contact Us?" Mitzvot is the answer, according to coordinators of **New York City** JCL affiliate BJ Reads.

Esther Garbow, 12, had trouble learning to read; she conquered her challenge through family support, dedicated teachers and beautiful children's books. When it was time to begin her Bat Mitzvah preparations, Esther searched for a tzedakah project that would reflect her personal history and values. One finger on the mouse put her in touch with NJCL.

Melanie Marcus, Communications Director of NJCL, arranged a match between the Garbow family in Brooklyn and BJ Reads, part of the social action/social justice program at B'Nai Jeshurun on the Upper West Side. The pairing worked well. Welcoming the Garbows with open arms and professional wisdom, coordinators Ellen Schecter (a children's book author) and Judy Gitenstein (a former editor of children's books) gave Esther a wish list of books tailored to the needs of emerging readers from P.S. 166.

Esther tucked the list, along with NJCL's mission statement, into the envelopes notifying friends and family about her upcoming simcha. In the end, she was able to contribute more than 160 of the requested titles.

When BJ invited her to deliver the gift in person, Esther arrived with boxes of books, her parents and grandparents in tow. She arranged her precious horde on a long line of tables. The students were "bowled over by the sheer magnitude of the treasure trove," Gitenstein recalls.

While the books themselves provide a lasting legacy for students and teachers at P.S. 166, Schecter emphasizes that Esther's impact reaches far beyond their colorful covers. Esther showed the children that a young person can tackle and complete a big project. And she added a new dimension to the closeness already shared by BJ volunteers. "'Esther Day' will become part of the lore of the program," says Gitenstein.

As her mitzvot ripple outward from the "People of the Book" to children who have none, Esther encourages other teens to think of NJCL when choosing a tzedakah project. As for the pebble at the center of NJCL's pond, Ellen Schecter asks–and answers–the question at the heart of our work: "What greater joy than helping a child learn to read?"

HARNESSING THE GOOD WILL OF BAT MITZVAH STUDENTS LIKE ESTHER GARBOW HELPS NJCL AFFILIATES EXTEND THEIR REACH BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THE CLASSROOM.



Show & Kvell

A COAST-TO-COAST ROUND-

Since we last met on the pages of Litbits, affiliates have completed another successful year of tutoring and this month are welcoming thousands of new students to the joy of reading. Between these two bookends, summer found our affiliates reviewing evaluations, organizing recruitment efforts and gearing up for the fall.

In addition, an increasing number of affiliates, from **New Haven** to **Detroit** to the **Bay Area**, offer summer school tutoring. Moreover, as a result of state-mandated testing, youngsters in some cities who are reading below grade level at the end of certain specified grades are now required to attend summer school. The children must pass a test at the end of summer or else repeat the grade. Volunteers at the JCC in Manhattan (one of our **New York City** affiliates) are experienced at addressing this pressing need. So, too, as of last summer, are volunteers in **Boston**.

Beginning in June, the Greater Boston JCL rolled out a series of pilot programs designed to meet the need while involving new volunteers unable to tutor during the school year. Interestingly, the program attracted many existing volunteers who wanted to continue their service over the summer. Opportunities included providing one-on-one tutoring as well as conducting read-aloud programs at public libraries.

Elsewhere in Massachusetts, the **North Shore** JCL, which last January began volunteering at the year-round Saltonstall School in Salem, continues its tutoring through the end of July. Koreh LA (our **Los Angeles** affiliate) is also involved in tutoring in schools that operate through the summer. (In addition, Koreh LA completed its first year of pre-school coaching for reading readiness, a successful program that continues this fall.)

Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (BJ) on **New York's Upper West Side** fields two JCL programs – BJ Reads (see page 3) and, as of last year, the B'nai Jeshurun/ Ralph Bunche School Reading Partners Program in Harlem. The new initiative enables volunteers to provide one-on-one 40-minute sessions with two students each week. The program, which targets 1st and 3rd graders, continues this fall. Co-ordinator Ruth Joseph notes that school principal Lauvia Sherman addressed the entire synagogue from the bima, where she presented Rabbi Marcel Bronstein with an African Kente cloth in a moving launch of the new relationship. The rabbi placed the friendship gift over his tallit.

The **Cleveland** JCL, noted for serving 30 percent of the students at a single school, this fall quadruples its program to an additional three schools based on strategic support from the Endowment Fund Committee of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland.

Now in its 4th year, the **Bergen County** JCL in New Jersey, which serves eight schools, last year added Kindergarten to its program. As well, the addition of another school brings the **Stamford** JCL total to 9 out of a possible 12 in that city.

Expansion is also on the drawing board at the **Greater Denver** JCL after five years of service to one Denver elementary school. Thanks to the backing of the Synagogue Council of Greater Denver, the affiliate has approached two additional schools, which look forward to forming partnerships with the affiliate's growing volunteer base.

Program coordinator Sandi Ogin notes that the volunteers consistently work beyond the perimeters of one-on-one tutoring. The Greater Denver JCL has brought opera and authors into the school and conducted a coat drive to help students weather the Colorado climate.

The **Detroit** JCL is now entering its 7th year working with the Bagley Elementary School. There, too, tutoring lies at the center of a larger wheel of commitment. Volunteers collected 14 musical instruments, including a piano, for the school's music program and reestablished the school library, which had been defunct for several years.

In **Minneapolis**, where our JCL affiliate is hosted by the JCRC's "Justice Squared" program, Karen and Elan Serfaty, a mother-son team, were recognized on the basketball court by no less than the Harlem Globetrotters.

UP OF AFFILIATE ACTIVITES







ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: DESTINY HERNANDEZ CELEBRATES GRADUATION FROM 1ST GRADE WITH HER READING PARTNER JENNY KRAIEM AT FESTIVITIES SPONSORED BY BJ READS IN MANHATTAN. KAREN AND ELAN SERFATY, A MOTHER-SON TEAM FROM THE TWIN CITIES JCL IN MINNEAPOLIS, WERE RECOGNIZED AS "NEIGHBORHOOD HEROES" AT A HARLEM GLOBETROTTER'S GAME. GREATER BOSTON JCL VOLUNTEER AMY WORTH SHARES ONE OF THE THOUSANDS OF BOOKS HER TEAM COLLECTED FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE BOSTON AREA.

Declared "Neighborhood Heroes" by the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency, local television station WBTV 23 and the Globetrotters, the Serfatys volunteer in an after-school reading program with at-risk students whose parents live in transitional housing.

Welcome to The **Greater Washington** JCL, which completed its pilot year and is happily ensconced in four Montgomery County schools this fall. Volunteers from a girls' yeshiva, two synagogues and Hadassah are participating in the program.

Five schools within a 100-mile radius in rural Connecticut benefit from individualized tutoring thanks to the **Eastern Connecticut** JCL. Tutors include seniors (transported by bus to the sites), cadets with the U.S. Coast Guard, retirees, and volunteers whose employers pay them to perform community service during work hours. Coordinator Susan Weiss recently developed an effective vehicle to track volunteer feedback and student progress. She provides volunteers with stamped and addressed update postcards that they return to her every month.

A new protocol also has been established by the **South Jersey** JCL. Working with school principals and liaisons, team coordinator Selina Barnett helped develop a student folder to enhance communication among volunteers, teachers, school administrators and parents. The folder, one for each child, includes material from the JCL training manual, a weekly feedback form filled out by volunteers and helpful information regarding each child's reading interests. These folders are shared with teachers and school administrators. The material goes home with each student at the end of the year.

How do **Hartford** public schools feel about the Hartford JCL? The answer can be found in a seven-minute video about the affiliate, currently being produced by the public schools themselves. The video, which includes footage of volunteers in session with their students, will be featured on public access T.V.

On the national front, inquiries to the **NJCL** web page are proving a promising source of opportunities for affiliates and the coalition as a whole. Many are from Bar and Bat Miztvah students seeking tzedakah projects. Others are from individuals looking to volunteer their time or help found a new program in their community.

In other news, plans are being made for the 2006 NJCL Institute to be held in Washington, D.C. next February. The 2005 Institute included 21 delegates from 17 cities.

REMOTE TUTORING: CUTTING THE COMMUTE IN

Etha Meeks can't clone herself, a wish held dear by numerous teachers whose students are reading–or failing to read–at many different levels. But Meeks, who teaches first grade at George Manierre Elementary School in Chicago, is coming closer than she ever dreamed.

This fall marks the fourth year that Manierre, the TOV Literacy Project (our **Chicago** JCL affiliate) and Innovations for Learning, a nonprofit organization founded by Chicago lawyer Seth Weinberger, have collaborated on a distance tutoring program for the city's public school children. TOV provides the volunteers and well-established relationships with the schools. Innovations for Learning contributes classroom computers, phone lines and an award-winning software curriculum.

In the coming weeks, Meeks will once again welcome TOV volunteers to a get-acquainted party with at-risk students. After that, the pupils will spend some time at the computers four days a week, reading stories and navigating the lessons at their own pace. One day a week the students will work with their volunteers, talking with them on the phone while working on-line. At year's end, a second party will allow students and tutors to celebrate together. According to observers on both ends of the line, the relationships are surprisingly close despite minimal "face time."

Here's how the program looks from Meeks' point of view: Class is under way when a phone next to the computers starts to ring. (It rings at same time every week, with one back-up time in case of a conflict on the tutor's end.) Meeks says "Hello" and beckons an expectant, already-grinning little girl. The teacher helps the child put on her headset, which plugs into the phone line. Then, seated at the computer, the child launches into an animated conversation with her tutor. A dual interface shows both student and volunteer the same computer screen, reflecting this child's precise point of progress in the literacy software curriculum. A tricky word appears on the screen. "I can't read that," the girl declares.

Here's how it looks from the volunteer's point of view: It's almost 1:30 and the office is humming, traffic is at a standstill and the weather is miserable, but none of that matters. He just closes the door and clicks on to his tutor log to review what he and his reading partner covered last week and where the challenges lie. The minute hand moves forward; he reaches for the phone and dials. In less than a minute the tutor is fully immersed in a 30-minute tutoring session and pep talk, reminding his little friend that she can do it; she's done it before.

Truth is, the kids are doing it, all of them, says Meeks. Last fall she placed six at- risk students with TOV tutoring partners. By mid-May two were reading above grade level, three at grade level and one below grade level but making steady progress and sustaining high motivation. It's the one-on-one attention, albeit in absentia, that does



CHICAGO ON-LINE TUTOR STEVE MILLER LOGS ON TO MEET HIS STUDENT VIA TELEPHONE AND INTERNET.

CHICAGO

the trick, according to Meeks. Even when she's working with a small group of children, everyone's reading at different levels, she points out. "With the TOV tutors, it's almost like having another adult in the room providing quality instruction at the child's individual level." Like many if not most of the teachers involved in NJCL programs across the country, Meeks laments the fact that her students don't have anyone to read with them at home on a daily basis. "This program gives the children ongoing dialogue with a committed adult who follows through."

Elizabeth Wilson, who coordinates the TOV team, can vouch for the focus and perserverence of the volunteers, who revel in their students' every achievement, every week. "When I started working with Martrell, he was just guessing at words," she recalls. "By the end of the school year, he was much, much better at sounding out."

In addition to the 25 on-line tutors at Manierre, TOV also places traditional in-class tutors at this and five other Chicago schools. Having both options provides a range of opportunities for potential volunteers, she adds. Some tutors–and some students–work best in a more intimate context, but for many busy professionals, time can be in short supply. "There must be hundreds of thousands of people out there who don't have time to volunteer in person,"adds Seth Weinberger. "We just need to get them engaged."



FROM LEFT: SARAH MEYTIN OF GREATER WASHINGTON, BOOTSJ. FOX OF WEST PALM BEACH AND MIRIAM DAVIDOW OF RICHMOND LEARNED ABOUT DISTANCE TUTORING AT THE NCJL INSTITUTE.

MORE ripples

Last winter, NJCL invited Weinberger to speak at our National Institute in Washington, D.C., attended by 21 delegates from 17 affiliates across the country. "When I came, I did not have expansion on my mind," Weinberger admits. After sitting in on the opening session in which results-oriented delegates representing thousands of volunteers shared their successes and challenges, Weinberger tore up his prepared speech on the philosophy of distance tutoring and jotted down notes on exactly how to make it happen. Just hours after delivering his remarks, Weinberger accepted an invitation to have coffee with NJCL's Koreh LA delegation and brainstorm how the program might work in **Los Angeles**. This month the pilot program in LA is taking off. Weinberger is also having conversations with affiliates in **San Francisco** and **Boston**.

Sometimes, Weinberger claims, he just clicks on the NJCL mission statement and ponders the message about mobilizing volunteers to help all American children learn to read by the end of 3rd grade. "It's not just a feel-good statement. It's about getting tangible results in society. And while there's nothing Jewish about wanting all American kids to learn to read, it stokes my Jewish pride that a Jewish organization is the one doing it."

Meanwhile, September finds Etha Meeks leading a new group of Manierre children toward a literate future. The effort is collective and cumulative, but Meeks isn't shy about giving credit to the TOV team. "I'm thrilled someone thought of this," she concludes. "The tutors are dedicated and the program actually works."

EAST MEETS WEST PALM BEACH

The parents are seeking a better life for their children. Illiterate in their native language, they immigrate to a new country only to face an onslaught of daunting new challenges: finding housing and work, adjusting to a new culture and language, helping their children get the education they themselves missed out on.

Nowhere is this reality more in evidence than in sprawling Palm Beach County, a 2,430-sqaure-mile district of melting-pot public schools. Among them is Wynnebrook Elementary, where flags representing students from 23 countries bedeck the cafeteria. The **West Palm Beach** Klein JCL (a division of the Jewish Community Relations Council) trains more than 300 volunteers serving Wynnebrook and 38 other elementary schools to work effectively and sensitively with this abundance of diversity, according to Boots J. Fox, coordinator of team. And while their efforts are effective with students learning English as a second language, the program, improbable as it sounds, provides a model for Ethiopians learning Hebrew in Israel as well.

Recently seven social workers, teachers and school administrators from Ramleh (between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv) paid a visit to the NJCL affiliate as part of an international program entitled "Parents and Children Together" (PACT). Created by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, with the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County providing the sole American funding, PACT provides a variety of early childhood services "...to ensure that every Ethiopian-Israeli child from birth to 6 years old receives a quality education..." Professionals from Ramleh and Palm Beach have been visiting back and forth as part of the Federation's five-year partnership with PACT.

This year, when the team from Israel arrived, Fox provided her guests with the same training packets she has developed for JCL volunteers. She then conducted a tour of Wynnebrook, including its one-on-one tutoring sessions. Fox points out that"the Ramleh team is eager to learn how we approach literacy work with these young immigrants." In addition, members of the PACT delegation, some of whom wore native Ethiopian garb, attended a 3rd grade assembly. The students chose a song to teach their guests and the visitors returned the favor.

The West Palm affiliate has hosted other foreign delegations. Among them was a group of young Jewish volunteers from Russia who work with handicapped adults in St. Petersburg's Jewish community. "It seems fitting that we welcome so many social activists from other countries," muses Fox. "Our work here involves us with children from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. We're a mini-United Nations."

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STUDENTS AT WYNNEBROOK ELEMENTARY, SERVED BY THE WEST PALM BEACH COUNTY KLEIN JCL, SERENADE ETHIOPIAN-ISRAELI VISITORS.

DESIGN: Rose Srebro Design, Newton, MA

While most, if not all, of our affiliates send students home with a gift book for the summer, Isobel Goldman, coordinator of the **Rochester JCL,** has added a colorful twist. "More than 65% of children in the city of Rochester attend schools in high poverty neighborhoods," she says. "The majority of these children leave school and go home without books or even a box of crayons." Goldman decided to tackle both deficits. Last spring, some 180 JCL volunteers gathered more than 6,000 gift books for distribution to youngsters in 37 schools.

In addition, as an offshoot of her JCL work, Goldman has for the last two years organized The Crayon Project, providing students with a box of crayons and a unique coloring book designed by twelve Rochester artists. Last spring 12,000 boxes of crayons and coloring books were distributed for summer use.

"Literacy and creativity are both empowering for young students," Goldman points out. "It's important to give them opportunities to succeed."

How can our volunteers expand the impact of tutoring a single child? Advocacy is the answer, according to Tammy Alfred Steinman, coordinator of **the Greater Boston JCL.** "By taking action, we can help make substantive changes on a system-wide level," she asserts. To that end our Boston affiliate has created the Save Our Schools web page at www.jcrc-boston.org/literacy. Timely articles and sample letters to legislators make it easy for JCL volunteers to learn about the issues and make their voices heard beyond the classroom. The web page also offers links to other groups doing ongoing educational advocacy.

Contents of this snazzy lunch box are designed to whet the appetites of company executives being courted for **Koreh LA's** corporate program. Included is a spongy, squeezable apple (for releasing tension) and a brochure for the program, through which employers allow their staff to train and tutor during the workday. So far, 70 employees from eight participating companies (ranging from law firms to a manufacturer of hi-tech equipment) have been trained and are tutoring public school students.

A new affiliate joins the NJCL, adding to our already formidable presence in Connecticut. Lauri Lowell, coordinator of the new **New Haven JCL**, reports that, "We spent eight months researching the best school with which to partner. We were looking for a strong principal and an organized, supportive environment." Christopher Columbus Family Academy, a bilingual school with a large Hispanic population, turned out to be the lucky winner. Principal Miriam Camacho has been instrumental in providing volunteers with cultural sensitivity training, using the school's impressive cadre of professional staff and consultants.

The New Haven JCL enjoyed another stroke of good fortune when the Women's Division of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven selected the JCL tutoring opportunity as its new community service project. "These professional, experienced and warm hearted women are getting us off to a terrific start," Lowell notes.

Elsewhere in Connecticut, outstanding work by the **Danbury JCL** in four local schools has prompted a fifth school to request the team's services. The 50 reading partners who participate in the program were honored recently at a volunteer appreciation luncheon. Keynote speaker Darla Show, Professor of Education at Western Connecticut State University, shared her expertise on children's books that deal with diversity.

One synagogue can make an enormous difference in the lives of young students, according to Vida Barron, chair of the book drive committee for the **Hartford JCL.** When committee member Bea Mitlak approached the staff at Emanuel Synagogue for support in the effort, the response was effusive. Emanuel's chapter of United Synagogue Youth turned tzedakah into a party through a "Book Sweep" held at Barnes and Noble. The teens divided into teams to locate books from wish lists provided by the affiliate's participating schools. By the end of the evening, the group purchased 63 new books for at-risk students in the Hartford program.

Meanwhile, Emanuel's younger pupils (kindergarten-2nd grade) designated the JCL as the recipient of their tzedakah donations, providing $150 for the gift books. Hartford JCL volunteers met with all of these Emanuel students and discussed the ways their contributions help other boys and girls.

Stamford Mayor Dannel P.Malloy spoke recently at a tutor recognition program honoring volunteers with five years of service with the **Stamford JCL**. Members of the Board of Education, as well as professional staff representing all eight participating schools, were in attendance and our affiliate has been asked to expand the program to Stamford's four remaining schools. The team, now 100 strong, working with 200 pupils, recently earned the Mayor's Youth Empowerment Award and was featured in Stamford's local newspaper, The Advocate. Interesting note: The Stamford JCL enriched its end-of-the-year book giving by holding parties at each school and inviting the stu-

dents' parents to attend. Parental participation in encouraging literacy is vital to a child's reading success (see page 7).

The **NJCL** web page is sporting a new look and new features. Visitors to www.njcl.net will find a more detailed history and mission statement and photos from our affiliates, as well as direct links to each affiliate and other related websites. The format also includes Litbits online and a listserve function enabling affiliates to share ideas and resources.

Meanwhile, plans are under way for the 2005 NJCL Institute, to be held next February in Washington, D.C. The program will draw on input from all affiliates, including the 27 participants from 17 affiliates across the country who attended last February's Institute. That gathering was held in Boston, in tandem with the annual Plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. Our delegates were thus able to attend a variety of presentations by national and international leaders on a wide variety of topics, including some directly related to our literacy work. Issues such as poverty, immigration and public school integration were all part of the JCPA agenda. During NJCL workshops, coalition representatives shared training materials, assessment tools, ideas and resources.