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Aldo Sanchez, a sixth-grader at Kelly Middle School, mentors first-grader **Luis Cook-Partida** as he brainstorms during a writing project on Wednesday at Howard Elementary School in Eugene.

LEARNING ALLIES

Sixth-graders mentor younger students, build leadership skills

By **KELSEY THALHOFER**
The Register-Guard

Howard Elementary School first-grader Luis Cook-Partida hasn't quite mastered spelling yet, but he's not afraid to practice with his friend Aldo Sanchez around.

"When I get a thing wrong, he just tells me to erase," said 7-year-old Luis, grateful for the chance to focus on learning in a low-pressure setting.

The one-on-one time he spends weekly with Aldo, a sixth-grader in Kelly Middle School's leadership class, is different than instruction from his teacher, who must split her time among all 29 students in his first-grade class.

For about 30 minutes each week, Luis has Aldo all to himself when the sixth-grader and his classmates walk to the elementary school to help their first-, third- and fifth-grade buddies with reading and writing skills.



This week, Luis pulled Aldo away from the bustle of energetic first-graders and into the classroom's reading corner to record observations in his school notebook about the class's newly hatched butterfly.

flies.

On top of getting one-on-one help from Aldo, Luis said he simply enjoys spending time with his mentor. "He's fun."

The buddy program, in

Teacher Jason Miller wanders through a classroom at Howard Elementary School on Wednesday while his students mentor first-graders. The older students spend about 30 minutes each week with the youngsters.

its first year at Kelly Middle and Howard Elementary, is designed to provide mentorship for the younger students and leadership opportunities for the older students.

Heather Hall, a student teacher who led Luis' class through its butterfly lesson this week, said the program provides extra support during her students' reading and writing time and gives them positive role models who are just a few years older.

"I think it's more attainable for them to see that's what the next step is," she said. "We have a lot of kids who really benefit from the one-on-one."

Sixth-grader Izzy Tierney enjoys guiding the first-graders through their caterpillar unit because she remembers studying the same thing when she was their age.

She also recalls struggling with her handwriting at that age, so is happy to help her

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buddy, 6-year-old Hope Correa, with her's.

Izzy said she looks forward to keeping up the relationship with Hope.

"Once you get older, when you're in high school and they're in middle school, they're going to remember you," she said.

Kelly sixth-grade leadership teacher Jason Miller proposed the exchange to Howard Principal Allan Chinn before the start of the school year, and has brought a different group of sixth-graders into the program every 12 weeks as class schedules rotate.

Miller said he envisioned the buddy program as a way to "show kids how they can be involved in their community."

He said he's enjoyed watching his students interact with their younger peers and build friendships that go beyond age and school barriers. One pair, a sixth-grader and a fifth-grader, became such good friends through the buddy program that they are now anticipating spending time together next year as middle schoolers at Kelly, he said.

Miller said he hopes the relationships will help students make a smooth transition into middle school. "We're trying to help everyone belong," he said.

Chinn said older and younger students

seem to look forward to their weekly time together. At the elementary level, he said, the visits can brighten reading and writing — subjects that are particularly challenging for some students.

It's another way to get kids excited about what they're doing, he said.

Howard students, he said, "look up to the older kids as role models and leaders, and it kind of gives them something to look forward to and aspire to."

For middle schoolers, he added, the program gives students a sense of pride. "It puts them in a positive place. They're going to want to be the role models that these kids are looking up to."

Aldo, who began mentoring Luis this spring, said he felt shy about being a mentor at first, but has grown more confident each week. "I like helping the little kids," he said.

He said he can relate to Luis because they share a strong work ethic in school, and he enjoys helping him build skills such as spelling.

More than a younger mentee, Aldo said, Luis has become "a friend."

Follow Kelsey on Twitter @kelseythalhofer. Email kelsey.thalhofer@register-guard.com.