

# Making magic after-school

Magician uses a few tricks to get kids reading

BY TIZIANA RINALDI

**S**ay Abracadabra and...poof! The teacher disappears! Thankfully, that's not the way it works, but a number of first graders enrolled at P.S.1 Courtland School located at 335 East, 152nd Street in the Bronx, are picking up some powerful magic spells that can take the mystery out of learning.

Instructing the children on how to perform and master the crafty tricks is Evan Paquette, a young professional magician and teaching artist with a master's degree in Educational Theater from New York University.

As part of Urban Stages and the Leadership Program, organizations that promote learning, literacy and leadership through the arts, Paquette has been touring New York City and more recently landed in the Bronx, where he uses age-appropriate magic curricula to boost academic and social skills in kids who, well, literally fall under his enchantment.

"Whenever I walk through the school, the children's eyes light up and I hear them whispering, 'There's the magic guy!,'" said Paquette amused by his celebrity status, which he skillfully leverages to "provide a safe place for the students to cultivate their creativity and experience joy in reading."

Even though his broader goals include team building, effective communication and civic and social awareness, his so-called experiential learning method aims at specific educational targets normally set by the schools that hire him. At P.S.1 the main reason for Paquette's "Magic Reading Club," the name of the after-school program he leads, is enthralling young disciples to become avid readers and life long learners.

But, is that a tall order for a magic club? No, not really, according to Tom Armstrong, P.S. 1 Leadership Program's site coordinator. "Magic engages students in ways that are innovative and fun as well as aca-

demically linked," he said.

The program is so popular that over one hundred first graders at the Courtland School signed up for it. Which means that the kids had their parents on board.

"The parents like it because they see how excited the students are to come to after school. And the teachers love it because it supports the [work] they do in the classroom."

Magic works by taking the unknown out of the experience. "Magic is mysterious, which is why it is exciting," explained Armstrong, "by teaching magic [Paquette] gives these children some power over that mystery. Reading about magic becomes the key to unlocking it."

Increasing children's "emotional connection to, and sense of wonder for problem solving," continued Armstrong, is the end game. Two other clubs run by the school that are already experimenting with the same developmental tasks are Wordsmiths and Creation Station, where students respectively create whole fantastic worlds through drawing and sculpture, based on the books they read, and create story books about interesting aspects of life in their neighborhood.

In the Magic Reading Club, split in two eight-week courses, Paquette, the first magician to work for the Leadership Academy, engages kids with such phenomena as vanishing coins, juggling scarves, delving into optical illusions, and (why not?) spinning plates.

"[Tricks] are the vehicle [for] skills," said Paquette explaining that in learning to vanish a coin, for example, a child will practice manual dexterity, hand-eye coordination and the ability to follow detailed instructions.

"The performance of a simple magic [routine] can embolden a



Evan Paquette

child's confidence, improve self-concept and equip them with a safe and fun way to be at the center of attention. Who doesn't want that? Paquette.

Indeed, among the many valuable assets kids can walk away with from a well-taught magic class are the development of both self-improvement and social skills. The young teacher knows because he talks from experience. Never "the jock, the baller dancer or the popular [guy]," magic gave him a unique and original form of expression and "a way to fit in."

But also, he stressed, it's really effective in recruiting and retaining new readers, in the sense that reading a magic book and memorizing the instructions in order to master a new trick produces an immediate and tangible pay-off. "It will impress your friends and family. A great feeling!"

Magic has a universal appeal, taps into something that transcends difference," said Paquette.

"In that moment of astonishment everyone, regardless of color, culture race or [yes] test scores, is on an equal field. As a student that moment feels good, as an educator it's a good place to start."

For more on Evan Paquette and work go to [www.magicewan.com](http://www.magicewan.com)