

News Release 2012

Oct. 10, 2012

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**UNITED WAY OF WHATCOM COUNTY INCREASES SUPPORT FOR EARLY LEARNING INITIATIVE,
EARNS REGIONAL RECOGNITION**

Bellingham—United Way of Whatcom County announced they are officially supporting a new program at Ferndale School district to help increase early learning. This is the first time United Way of Whatcom County has supported a combined collaborative pilot project such as this with the total grant amount of \$56,779 to fund the Early Learning Connections program.

The Early Learning Connections program will include a needs-assessment to find out what parents and children require regarding education, as well as what teachers would like to see their students achieving. The program will focus on early literacy activities in preschool, early literacy Check-Out Kits from the library that will provide activities parents and kids can do together, an intake and referral system to connect families with community resources, and a parent education class, because parents are the earliest teachers a child has access to. Included in the program will be assessments to track students' progress, as well as the ability to have the children in the school's database while still in preschool, making it possible for teachers to already know the needs and abilities of the student. This is a pilot project and will test out strategies and set an example to encourage other school districts to begin a project like this one. United Way of Whatcom County previously funded a planning process to create this program and is now committed to supporting it and making it successful.

Julie Mauermann, project lead of the Ferndale School District Early Learning Connections program, puts emphasis on how important early learning is for children. "Research shows that children who do not experience the kind of strong early literacy development that prepares them to be proficient readers by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers who have access to quality early learning. This creates a double jeopardy for some of our children because living in poverty increases their likelihood of dropping out of school to six times more than their non-low-income peers."

The project will implement multiple methods for improving early learning, focusing on enhancing language development, motor development and social-emotional development—all of which are key factors in determining success in school. The activities are also linked to developing writing and reading practices in kindergarten. Story-telling, rhyming, and singing are just a few examples of activities that link to key early learning concepts.

President of United Way of Whatcom County, Peter Theisen, talks about the different types of actions United Way is now taking. “United Way is taking some steps to get upstream of the issues in the community, to prevent problems before they happen. We are convening local leaders and working with a variety of programs to look for root-causes to find solutions and intervene early on. This is a big change for United Way from the emergency aspect to more of a preventative focus.”

Because of work like this, United Way of Whatcom County was recognized by Northwest Early Learning (NWEL) and Whatcom Early Learning Alliance (WELA) as an Early Learning Champion. The award was presented at the NWEL and WELA Early Learning Breakfast in Anacortes on September 25. Jessica Sankey, the correspondent for the award said that “Whatcom Early Learning Alliance members took very little time to agree that the United Way of Whatcom County and its Vision Planning Committee should receive this award. The organization’s decision to take a stand on this issue for the first time was momentous. To focus funding and support on early learning/early literacy projects shows strong forward thinking.”

Regarding the future of the community, Sankey said, “We all know that children are born learning. What they learn, as well as what kind of environments they are exposed to, affects what kind of adults and community members they will grow to be. The people of United Way were concerned to note that high school graduation rates in Whatcom County have remained stagnant between 70-75% for years. In addressing this concern, it was very farsighted of them to acknowledge the strong link between high school graduation and early learning experiences for children. Moreover, the attention our United Way is paying early learning does not go unnoticed. Other local leaders have been inspired to see the United Way guide the path towards making high-quality early learning experiences available to all children in Whatcom County.”

United Way of Whatcom County is excited about this new program and to see how it will positively affect the future of the community. The program will be held at Central and Mt. View elementary schools, which have no access to traditional preschool programs. These schools have the highest needs in the district, with very low income families and families who speak English as a second language.

United Way of Whatcom County has worked for over 50 years to improve lives by mobilizing individuals and organizations to create long-term change by investing in Education, Income and Health for all Whatcom County residents. To learn more about United Way of Whatcom County visit www.unitedwaywhatcom.org or check out their Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/UnitedWayWhatcom>