

## Op-Ed 2014

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### EARLY LITERACY IS THE FOUNDATION OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING

By Pamela Nyberg Kiesner, Director, Bellingham Public Library

When you were a young child, did you have a favorite book? One that brings back fond memories, that always strikes a nostalgic chord when you see it? If you do then you may have been exposed to books and reading at a young age and this exposure opened the door to your future, in school and beyond.

United Way of Whatcom County knows the importance of early literacy and is working with a variety of partners to increase early literacy in our community, including the Bellingham Public Library. We are proud to support these efforts, which dovetail well with our library mission and goals.

Reading to children is a longstanding part of many cultures, but multiple studies indicate that this practice is even more crucial than we thought. Research now shows that creating rich experiences in the earliest years of a child's life has profound and lasting impacts on their learning, throughout their school years and beyond.

#### **Forming a foundation for learning**

Early literacy is what children know about communication and language before they begin reading and writing. Through early experiences of talking, singing, reading, writing and playing, children develop essential skills that form the foundation for learning to read.

The earlier and more frequently children are exposed to early literacy skills, the stronger this foundation is built. With a strong foundation, children enter school ready to learn to read and write and succeed.

When they start kindergarten prepared, they require less remediation, grade repetition, special education and other services to boost their skills.

Many children who start out behind in kindergarten stay behind through high school. According to statistics gathered by the Whatcom Early Learning Alliance earlier this year, 67% of Whatcom County children entering kindergarten meet literacy standards. This first kindergarten readiness standard appears to be a good measure of future school success: among Whatcom County third grade students, 71% read at grade level and by the end of high school, 74% of students graduate.

According to Thrive by Five Washington, every dollar invested in early learning is \$7 saved on future costs. Investing in early literacy and early learning provides significant long-term results that benefit us all: a stronger economy with skilled, productive adults, reduced crime rates and costs, reduced use of government-assisted programs, increased graduation rates, and more.

Of course, benefits to society as a whole are not the only reasons for reading to a child, or making a habit of all the five practices. Talking, singing, reading, writing and playing together strengthen family bonds and are special activities shared between parents and children. They provide a lifetime of cherished memories as well as a solid foundation for learning.

### **Early literacy a priority**

United Way of Whatcom County has made early literacy a priority, working at critical points to help children achieve their potential and enter school on track. To do this they are partnering with a variety of local programs such as the Affordable Childcare Program with Bellingham Childcare and Learning Center, the Early Learning Connections Program with the Ferndale School District, and Early Learning Programs at the Whatcom Family YMCA.

In addition to these partnerships, United Way of Whatcom County distributes a free Kindergarten Readiness Calendar to over 6,000 local families. The Bellingham Public Library is proud to assist with this program, helping distribute calendars to our community.

This is one of many ways your local libraries are also advancing early literacy in our community.

For many years the Bellingham Public Library and the Whatcom County Library System have been working together on an early learning initiative called Raise a Reader. Raise a Reader: Books for Babies is a program that gives each baby born at PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center a new board book of their

very own. Families also receive information about the services the library systems offer to support early literacy, available in English, Spanish and Russian. Raise a Reader has also partnered with several pediatric clinics in the county. These clinics, which were already sending free books home at well-child exams through the national Reach Out and Read program, are now also including library information in the material that goes home with parents.

Our goal is simple: help every family know the importance of talking, singing, reading, writing and playing with their child every day, beginning at birth. Parents are a child's first and best teachers, and we want to empower parents to take simple measures to increase their child's pre-reading skills. We offer storytimes and other programs to share the joy of reading with families and their children.

### **Local dollars, local results**

Making progress on important community issues such as early literacy takes all of us working together. United Way of Whatcom County is dedicated to advancing education, income and health for our community. I invite you to join me and make a contribution today to United Way of Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund. The annual campaign to raise dollars for this fund is underway now. Every dollar donated to this fund stays in Whatcom County, is overseen and vetted by trained volunteers, and is invested to increase early literacy, improve graduation rates, ensure everyone has a place to call home, and help people achieve healthy lifestyles.

When I see a smile on the face of a little one picking out a book for the first time, or a parent snuggled up and reading to their child in our Children's Library, I know the lasting impact this will have on their lives. Your gift will make a measurable difference, supporting lasting solutions that build opportunity for everyone.

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