

News Release 2012

February 1, 2012

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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UNITED WAY OF WHATCOM COUNTY LAUNCHES NEW EARLY LITERACY INITIATIVE

BELLINGHAM, Wash.—United Way of Whatcom County is excited to announce the launch of their new early learning initiative that will connect individuals and community partners to increase high school graduation rates. The decision was made earlier this week to collaborate with the Ferndale School District to significantly impact the success of children entering kindergarten, giving them the tools they need to graduate high school and become successful later in life.

The Ferndale School District will be the recipient of a \$5,480 grant for a targeted early literacy program. United Way of Whatcom County will be taking an active role in designing the project in order to create a program blue print for other schools and districts to implement. There were seven total proposals that were submitted and all had strong qualities with a cross-sector collaborative focus that made for a very tough decision. The chosen program, PREPARED, is aimed toward pre-kindergarten children with a focus on enhancing early childhood literacy at Central Elementary School in Ferndale.

Like United Way of Whatcom County, the program is focused on early childhood literacy in order to increase high school graduation rates and better prepare young students for success. National research shows early childhood is a critical time for developing the skills necessary for transitioning into school, educational achievement and graduation. According to the Kids Count Data Center website, in 2011 the high school graduation rate for Whatcom County was 78%.

Both, the President of United Way of Whatcom County, Peter Theisen, and Principal, Mischa Burnett, of Central Elementary see high school graduation as a gateway to success for students later on in life. This is the first time United Way of Whatcom County has taken a leadership role in working with a school district for a targeted project within the community.

The program is focused toward children living in poverty, ages 3 to 5. It will serve families that do not have the resources for early childhood programs due to low income, lack of reliable transportation, impact of traumatic events and language barriers. The program contains various activities, a referral system for parents and a summer jump-start program for students in order to enhance early childhood literacy.

“The Ferndale School District had already made a commitment toward early childhood literacy,” said Theisen. “We are excited to work with them and make a significant impact in the community.” Central Elementary has the greatest number of children living in poverty in the Ferndale area and also lacks the access to necessary services. According to the Census Bureau from 2006 to 2010, the poverty rate of Ferndale was 19% while Whatcom County’s was 15%.

“We want to see all kids get off to a great start, and we believe this is a big step in the right direction,” said Burnett. He acknowledges there are other great programs geared toward early learning, but most of those are unable to reach all the students.

“Preschool is so beneficial for early success in school, but for families on the edge financially, it’s become a lot harder to afford,” said Burnett. For the past five years he has seen the majority of Central students enter school without any prior exposure to preschool programs, and for some English is their second language.

The Ferndale School District is collaborating with various partners such as Brigid Collins Family Support Center, Ferndale Boys and Girls club and the Ferndale Public Library. The program is a test pilot for United Way of Whatcom County and is being constructed in a format that will allow it to be a portable program with room for growth and expansion in to other schools and districts in our community.

“We’re excited about developing a program that in time can be shared with other like-minded educational communities,” said Burnett. Planning for the program is projected to last until August 2012. Implementation into the school district is estimated to begin the following September.

“In my heart, I know this will change lives in a very lasting way because it gives extra time and support to the students who need it the most, when they need it the most,” said Burnett.

United Way of Whatcom County has worked for over 50 years to increase financial resources for local health and human service needs, and to seek and invest in community-building opportunities to improve Education, Income, and Health for Whatcom County residents.

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References:

Census Bureau

Kids Count Data Center