

Tackling Tough Issues



together

 Hartford Foundation
for Public Giving

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Illiteracy Begins at an Early Age

The best predictor of a child's literacy level is that of his or her mother. Children of literate parents are more successful in school, less likely to drop out, and perform better on standardized tests. By funding efforts to improve literacy rates among adults, the Foundation is helping their children grow up literate.

In addition, the Foundation has also targeted services directly to children – beginning in the early years.

Over 22,000 children and youth are being educated in Hartford; they represent 20 percent of our region's future workforce. Young children's competency in reading is one of the most critical steps for long-term academic achievement. In fact, third graders' reading proficiency is the best predictor of high school graduation.

Unfortunately, Hartford students' reading scores continue to be below grade level. In May 2007, only 13 percent of Hartford third grade students were reading at or above the goal for the CMT, compared to 52 percent statewide.

National research indicates that 95 percent of children can learn to read. The majority of children who enter kindergarten at risk for reading failure can learn to read at average or above levels, but only if they are identified early and provided with intensive instruction in the building blocks of reading.

Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools Steven J. Adamowski agrees that early literacy is critical. "If we could get every student reading at grade level at the end of third grade, we could transform our schools," he said. "When kids learn to read, then they can read to learn."

Focusing on Young Children

In its first 15 years, the Foundation's most ambitious initiative, geared toward improving the school readiness of Hartford's children, focused primarily on reaching children and their families in the preschool years. In 2000, the Foundation expanded its Brighter Futures Initiative to include children as they enter and begin their school experience.

"We wanted to extend the gains children were achieving in early childhood programs as a result of increased staff training," said Chris Hall, vice president for programs and special projects. "Since early reading proficiency is one of the strongest predictors of long term school success, we decided to focus on improving literacy in the early grades."

In 2006, the Foundation entered into a collaboration with Hartford Public Schools and Haskins Laboratories, a private, nonprofit research institute based in New Haven with a primary focus on speech, language and reading. A

grant of \$844,000 from the Foundation funded a pilot program in five public schools in Hartford to improve the reading skills of students in kindergarten, first and second grades.

After one year, the results are encouraging, especially those comparing Hartford students to their peers nationally," said Chris. "We are eager to see if these results are continued and confirmed in the second and third years of the project

Empowering Teachers

The project focuses on enhancing teacher knowledge and practice. Kindergarten, first and second grade teachers receive on-site professional development, as well as coaching, help with lesson planning, and lesson modeling from a Haskins-trained literacy specialist.

Research shows that it takes at least two years for teachers to master the essential components of literacy instruction," says Margie Gillis, project director for the Haskins Literacy Initiative. "This requires understanding how children learn to read and what to do to ensure that all children are proficient by third grade. Teachers just aren't receiving this information during their pre-service education."

"The Haskins mentor has empowered teachers to reach a standard that they couldn't have attained without her," says Gerald Martin, principal of Rawson School. "The knowledge that teachers have gained has led to student success that I've never witnessed before."

Dee Cole, principal of the Noah Webster School, agrees. "Teachers now have higher expectations of their students – they expect them to be on grade level or above for all aspects of literacy – reading, writing, speaking, and listening," she says. "I now hear children using much more sophisticated language than in the past."

Similar to other projects funded through the Foundation's Brighter Futures Initiative, the Haskins project builds long-term institutional capacity to continue achieving positive results for children long after support from the Foundation ends.

Conclusion

Mastering literacy skills builds pride and confidence and leads to full participation in the workforce as well as family and civic life. To fully address the literacy issue in this region requires a comprehensive and coordinated system of services for adults and children, parents, immigrants, and native born Americans. Through partnerships with nonprofits and other funders, the Hartford Foundation is committed to helping children to older adults in our region come out of the shadows of illiteracy.

Second-grader, Lavarey, reads aloud with confidence, “Why does the polar bear need camouflage?” When a visitor exclaims that she doesn’t even know how to spell camouflage, he looks straight at her and says, “c-a-m-o-u-f-l-a-g-e.” When asked why the polar bear needs to blend in with his surroundings, Lavarey explains that it’s not to hide from enemies, like with other animals, but so that his prey won’t see him coming.

His teacher proudly states that halfway through the second grade, Lavarey has become proficient in reading and his comprehension is excellent. In fact, he recently scored the highest in his class on a benchmark assessment of the reading program.

This wasn’t always the case. When Lavarey entered first grade, he was at high risk of reading failure. Fortunately, he was in a school and classroom that was participating in the Haskins Literacy Initiative, which focuses on improving reading among children in the early grades by enhancing teacher knowledge of the science of reading and how to teach it. The project is funded in five Hartford elementary schools by the Hartford Foundation, as part of its Brighter Futures Initiative.

With coordinated assistance from his teacher, the Haskins’ mentor, and other support professionals that continued throughout first grade and summer school, Lavarey caught up. “When he joined the rest of the students, he was so excited!” says his teacher. “He’s always one of the first to raise his hand to answer a question.”

Lavarey now reads to his five-year-old twin brothers. His favorite book? *Ratatouille*. (And you can be sure he knows how to spell it.)



Reading is Smooth



Second-grader, Lavery, reads to Linda Bronstein, of the Haskins Literacy Initiative.

Sailing – Now

