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TODD COOPER

Literacy Partners

Dramatic dip in middle school test scores stirs businesses to get involved.

Eugene middle schools and area businesses have partnered together this year with a common goal: improving student literacy.

Pairing private donations with public schools isn't new, but this story has a twist. We're not talking merely the ubiquitously appreciated cash donation. Rather, the Eugene Literacy Partners Program boldly invites local businesses to offer schools another precious resource: their workers' time and energy. Through this innovative initiative students benefit from time with one-on-one reading mentors, and employees enjoy the satisfaction of volunteering while on the clock.

Since spring 2004, seven of eight 4J middle schools have launched or begun coordinating a literacy mentoring program. The Literacy Partners program addresses the challenges of a broadening community, but our district is not an isolated case. The 4J District was one of seven districts selected statewide to attempt a public/private project, a "Partnership for Student Success," and so far, local reactions are exceeding expectations. Right out of the gate, the literacy partners program is clearly benefiting kids; and teachers, parents, and their partnering businesses are taking notice.

WHY FOCUS ON ADOLESCENT LITERACY?

In elementary education, the goal is to teach children to learn to read, but in middle school, children have to read to learn. Because middle school and high school academics are rightly dependent on reading ability, kids who start to slip in reading comprehension may struggle through all their other subjects. Success depends not on merely reading words on a page, but at working with the content as a whole to interpret, analyze and expand on what's already been learned.

Yet there is a disheartening downward national trend in the basic skills that will open doors to college and work. Policies at the state and national level have typically introduced reading interventions at the younger grade levels, under the hopeful belief that, as Robert Rothman questions: "If students can read by age 9, they will be fine." But reading on time is no guarantee of reading to learn, as Rothman continues, (in the *Harvard Graduate School of Education Journal* September '04), "[T]his emphasis on beginning readers may not be enough."

Local testing echoes the same chilly reality heard across the country: In 4J, based on the Oregon State Assessment tests for last year, approximately 90 percent of elementary students meet state reading

standards, but by the eighth grade that number drops to 74 percent.

The gulf between students and the K-12 achievement standards put in place by the 1991 Oregon Education Act seems to widen. Put another way, 4J faces a crisis wherein a quarter of its middle school population tries to succeed without a fully developed arsenal of tools. If I can't successfully read for comprehension, how can I learn?

PARTNERSHIP FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

The Literacy Partners Program seeks to mitigate some of the frustration and anxiety over middle school reading. In this novel approach, businesses meet their community involvement needs head-on. As area businesses partner-up in the program, they deepen their ties to neighborhoods and schools, as well as their understanding of the larger issues facing education.

The students in the program seem to appreciate the one-to-one mentoring ratio in their reading classes or after-school program each week. Adam Christensen, a student at Roosevelt Middle School, has been with the literacy program there since September, and says he's motivated to work hard with mentor Kyle Banks of Wells Fargo, because, Adam says, "I just like reading."

And equally notable, pre- and post-mentoring tests demonstrate that community tutoring is improving reading skills among the participants. But there is something more at stake: What will be the long-term impact if businesses invest in directly influencing

the quality of education in their community? As Literacy Partners Program Outreach Co-director Larry Smith asserts, "Mentoring is a powerful learning strategy, because your performance level goes up so you don't disappoint the mentor. This allows children to see and experience that someone in the community really cares about them."

Smith's partner, Don Jackson adds, "If the unions, the employees, the small business owners said 'We would like to make success in the schools part of our program agreement,' then we could really make some social change."

GETTING STARTED

In 2004, Eugene 4J was selected by the Portland-based E3 organization (Employers for Education Excellence) as a district that could benefit from some oomph from the business sector. With the infrastructure in place to support developing relationships among businesses and schools, School Superintendent George Russell and UO President Dave Frohnmayer received their marching orders to gather a board to identify problem areas in our community's education.

Though the Literacy Partners Program has come together at a breakneck pace, it didn't have to start entirely from scratch. The non-profit E3 assisted the Partnership for Student Success board with a template for success: E3 could provide models for effective partnership programs, and this nudged the planning process from the drawing board to the classroom more quickly. Created by the Oregon Business Council in 1996, E3 works with employers to boost academic