



Bush Foundation Funding Renewal Enables SU to Continue Family Literacy Program

Former First Lady Barbara Bush continues to support SU's May Literacy Center. The center received a grant renewal from the Bush Foundation for the fall, spring and summer 2011. SU is one of only three grant recipients in the state to receive funding renewal. In the past, the Bush Foundation has only provided start-up grants.

Three faculty members from SU's Seidel School of Education and Professional Studies, Drs. Gwen Beegle and Joyce Wiencek of the Education Specialties Department and Dr. Chin-Hsiu Chen of the Teacher Education Department, initially received a \$49,974 grant from the foundation's Maryland Family Literacy Initiative in 2010. Wiencek acquired the \$49,000 grant renewal, which, along with additional funding from SU, will enable the center to continue its literacy program through next spring. The grant supplies

program funding, meals, staffing, giveaways and transportation, if needed. This spring, Wiencek and education instructor Kristina Belcher traveled to Louisville, KY, to present at the National Family Literacy Conference.

Wiencek and her colleagues saw a grant call for literacy, so they submitted a proposal. "We honestly did not expect to get funded, but we got funded the very first time we tried," explained Wiencek, who currently directs the program.

The funds support the "Promoting Literacy at Home: Parents and Children Talking, Reading, Writing and Creating Brighter Futures" program at the University's May Literacy Center, which primarily serves low-income families on the lower Eastern Shore. The focus of the program is to help elementary school children, ages 3-11, build their reading literacy skills. The children and their parents attend weekly sessions at the center and participate in field trips. Families also receive books and other materials to support literacy at home.

Since the program's inception a little over a year ago, the May Literacy Center has grown. Parents' word of mouth helps to keep the sessions full, but the center also has forged alliances with local area schools to help recruit participants, most notably,

IN THE COMMUNITY

Pinehurst Elementary and Prince Street Elementary, both located in Salisbury, MD. According to Wiencek, the staff, which consists mostly of graduate and undergraduate students, had planned for 20 families, but 23 families – that is, 23 adults and nearly 40 children – showed up on the first night of the summer 2011 program.

The program has also grown to help meet the family literacy needs of the area's Hispanic population. "A third of the families coming to us right now are Hispanic (Spanish speaking) and they want to learn English," said Wiencek. "So we've modified our curriculum to assist them. We hired a translator and we now provide bilingual texts for children and parents. That's a big step for us."

Along the way to becoming established, the program has met with and still works to overcome some challenges. One of the greatest challenges has been recruitment and retention, which is fairly typical of family literacy programs across the country. "You are dealing with a fragile population; some of the families are homeless," said Wiencek. "We work really hard to keep the families that we get. We call weekly to remind them and encourage them to come and even provide transportation if they need it." The center also connects families with other community services.

Through its community outreach efforts, the literacy center has built a strong relationship with Shore Up, an Eastern Shore organization dedicated to helping families, particularly parents who are trying to improve their educational situation.

According to Wiencek, the center's proudest accomplishment is the change in the children who participate in the program. Many have experienced marked improvement in their grades and test scores. "We have teachers who are asking the parents, 'what did you start doing that has made the difference,'" commented Wiencek. The program also has helped to change kids' attitudes about reading. Unfortunately, the testing culture in public schools today doesn't foster the love of reading, something the literacy center strives to do on a regular basis. In fact, each week, every child leaves the center with a book. The children are also given crates to take home, decorate and use to set up their own home libraries. "It's great to see kids excited about reading and

wanting to come," said Wiencek.

The grant renewal and additional support from SU will enable Wiencek and her staff to run the program through next spring, but the center is currently seeking alternative funding opportunities to maintain and grow the program. A long-range goal for the center is to expand to include literacy programs for children, teens and adults, and there is definitely a need for expanded literary services. Wiencek said that she gets calls every day from middle schools and high schools in need of tutoring assistance, but the center doesn't have the resources to accommodate them all. One high school called and asked for 25 reading tutors. The Reading Clinic, another on-campus literacy tutoring program that Wiencek runs, has a waiting list of some 30 children.

On the Eastern Shore, literacy is a much bigger issue than many people realize. Wiencek gets calls from all kinds of groups and individuals looking for help. Some of the calls she gets are from adults who have had issues in their lives such as problems with drugs and they realize that part of the reason they are in trouble is that they didn't have an education to help them make better decisions. Also, the influx of the Hispanic population has had an impact.

One of the problems is that literacy tutoring is very expensive, and many families simply do not have the resources to help their children. Most parents don't know how to help their children, which is what makes the program at the May Center unique. When the kids come for the evening, the parents have to be committed to coming

with their children. During each session, Wiencek conducts a 45-minute parent education workshop to help them understand what the children are doing and what the undergraduate and graduate student tutors are doing. After dinner (the center provides the participating families with meals), the parents and children work together to practice what they have learned.

All who participate – faculty, students, parents and children – walk away with a good feeling about the program. Some of the parents who accompany their children to the weekly sessions are grappling with their own negative experiences with reading. When they start to have positive experiences, it begins to change the whole family dynamic. If a parent feels good about reading and is willing to read with his or her child, then the child is more likely to enjoy reading as well.



Dr. Joyce Wiencek

