

UWO literacy project research may help address student reading gap

by Tim Holdsworth - Wednesday, December 14, 2011

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/15916/uwo-literacy-project-research-may-help-address-student-reading-gap/>

In November 2010, only 78 percent of economically disadvantaged third graders in Winnebago County scored proficient or advanced on reading achievement tests compared to 87 percent of other students according to the recent Southern Winnebago County Leading Indicators for Excellence (LIFE) study. In addition, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in Southern Winnebago County school districts increased to 39 percent, a 7 percent increase from 2008-2009 numbers.

While highlighted by the study as an area of concern, the Oshkosh Area United Way is already working to close this reading achievement gap for economically disadvantaged children through a literacy program made available through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which sends children from birth to age five one book to their home each month.

While anecdotal information from parents suggests the program is showing successful results, the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh College of Education and Human Services Reading Department, in partnership with the United Way, the Wisconsin State Reading Association and the Oshkosh Public Library, is in the process of conducting a formal, multi-year research study on how the program affects a child's literacy development and family literacy interactions.

"In general, we believe that the younger a child interacts with language and literature, the better off the child will be academically and throughout life," UW Oshkosh reading professor Michelina Manzi, who along with assistant reading professor Elizabeth Alderton is leading the study.

"We are gathering data on family literacy to show the impact of what parents and guardians do with their children in terms of literacy," Alderton said. "One year into the study, the findings appear positive." A second major data collection point will occur spring 2012, and again will engage UWO pre-service teachers in the research process.

"We believe the program can not only improve the language skills of all children, it can provide additional opportunities for parents and children to spend quality time together, thus reinforcing the child/parent relationship," said Sue Panek, executive director of the Oshkosh Area United Way.

One key to the program is the excitement of getting something at home. Oshkosh resident Lorianna Schmidt, whose son Dylan has participated in the program since February, confirms that excitement. "Dylan really looks forward to receiving the books. Once we receive them, he asks us to read them over and over again. After reading through the books a few times, repeats the words in everyday situations, so it is helping with his vocabulary and expression."

Currently the Imagination Library program serves about 1,300 children in Oshkosh. "There are approximately 4,200 more children who we could enroll in the program if we had additional funding,"

said Panek. “This would go a long way toward helping these children excel in reading.”

Learn more:

- Anyone interested in supporting the Imagination Library can learn more by contacting Oshkosh Area United Way, 36 Broad Street, Suite 100, Oshkosh, WI 54901. www.oshkoshunitedway.org.
- The Southern Winnebago County LIFE Study is sponsored by the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation, Oshkosh Area United Way and the U.S. Venture Fund for Basic Needs. For more information visit <http://www.lifestudy.info/life-studies-local/southern-winnebago-life-study>.