

Born readers: Babies, books and Fairless Local's literacy plan

By Amy L. Knapp

IndeOnline.com staff writer

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“Just like Massillon gives their newborns a football, we want to give our newborns a book from the school,” said Fairless Local's Mike Hearn on how the district is working on reading readiness.

BREWSTER Fairless Local is making an investment the school district hopes will pay off in future readers.

The concept is simple: Connect children and families with books early — even before a child is born.

The logic seems sound: Research shows it's never too early to develop literacy skills.

The conclusion is clear: If parents read to children from birth (or before), the child will be better prepared to learn to read by the time he or she is a kindergarten student.

It doesn't mean children will be reading before they start school, but they will have the basic skills to begin the process.

To get there, Fairless educators are building an army, bringing together community members, educators, parents and other groups to provide an arsenal of tools to help get future students ready for the classroom.

Recognizing a need

Last year while writing a competitive grant, district officials learned that 74 percent of incoming kindergartners did not demonstrate reading readiness at the beginning of the school year.

A Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, an evaluation given to all kindergartners in Ohio, showed the students were not ready to learn how to read. For example, students were unable to hold a book the correct way, or understand that a group of letters is a word, and they lacked an awareness of environmental print. While a child can't read, he or she might recognize the golden arches and know that it is a McDonald's.

The data stood out for concerned educators.

“There’s no denying we are dealing with some gaps that we are trying to close,” Mike Hearn, curriculum, instruction and special programs director at Fairless, said. “Research shows students that start behind stay behind. We could grow them a year or even two but they will still be behind.”

Hearn said the district has made great strides in closing the reading gap and has seen success, with students in fourth and fifth grades passing state exams. However, without continued support, those students would likely fall behind as they progress through school.

To fill the reading gap, educators are putting a focus on children who have yet to start kindergarten, and those who aren’t even old enough to hold a book.

Starting at birth

According to Stark Education Partnership, research shows you don’t have to wait until children are born to begin their educational experience.

Expectant parents can read to their child in the womb.

Fairless Local wants to get books into the hands of potential students the day they are born.

“Just like Massillon gives their newborns a football, we want to give our newborns a book from the school,” Hearn said.

Discussions are underway with area hospitals to implement the program that would not only give infants their first book but also provide information to new parents on how to spark their child’s love of reading.

“We are trying to find a way to connect to our newest parents,” Hearn said. “The information will tell them how important it is to read to them, talk to them and point out words. You can’t start that early enough.”

They also hope to establish relationships with the parents sooner so they can begin to network and see the schools as a resource, he said.

“We look at this as an investment,” Hearn explained. “It’s not only getting the books into their hands but showing parents how to model and coach the child.”

Teresa Purses, president of the Stark Education Partnership, is excited to see the efforts Fairless is making to improve literacy.

The problem is not isolated to Fairless, she pointed out, noting her group is working with schools in Massillon, Canton and Alliance on early literacy programs.

A county-wide group of childhood providers and support organizations have been working together since December of 2016, focusing on children from birth, with literacy being one component, she said.

“We know school readiness is a predictor of the third-grade reading guarantee and eighth-grade math and high school graduation rates. We know that we have to spend a lot of time on how to empower and equip parents for their student’s success,” Purses said. “We know that we can’t wait for them to get to kindergarten. It’s as much about making everyone understand it is a prenatal to kindergarten opportunity to change the outcome of our youth and community.”

Purses calls the approach by Fairless local “brilliant.”

“It’s prevention instead of intervention later,” she said. “It’s exciting to see their energy and how they are acting on what they now see as an expansion of their k-12 role. They are spending so much money on intervention; imagine what they could do if a (student) were ready.”

SPARKing a love of reading

The second step is implementing the SPARK — Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids — reading program.

Through a \$10,000 donation from Eric Kimble of Kimble Co. and donations of materials from other SPARK programs, the district was able to offer the program to about 20 children. The donations will allow the district to support the program for about 10 years, Hearn said.

The kindergarten readiness program works with children ages 3 to 5, and their families, to ensure they are ready to begin school.

Intervention specialist Deb Husted meets with the children and their parents once a month at their home. Fairless Special Education Director Ryan Murphy volunteered to take on the administrative duties for the program.

Husted splits her time between the school and SPARK program. She is able to flex her schedule in order to meet with children any day of the week, morning or night.

During the visits, Husted conducts different lessons with the child while educating parents on how to prepare the child for kindergarten, assess skill levels and offers tools to help them be their child’s teacher. The children receive books as well as tools for parents to work with their child.

The program is focusing on 4-year-olds but could expand next year to reach more children.

SPARK is a game changer, Fairless Elementary Principal Colleen Kornish said.

“We are so excited we can offer it here. Deb Husted is a teacher and she knows what to do to help kids learn,” she said. “And they get actual books to start a library at home.”

Reaching for the stars

There are a number of area preschools within the Fairless district, Hearn said, and officials want to tap into the resource.

Educators have reached out to the preschools to discuss aligning teaching methods with the district.

The district wants to partner with preschools and provide materials, training and support so they have access to some of the same literacy instruction, Hearn explained.

They hope to get into the preschools — including the one at Fairless Elementary — the Sit Together and Read program, a simple reading program developed at Ohio State University that includes a 30-book series lets parents help their children to recognize letters and words. The program was designed to do about 15 minutes of reading daily.

Through a donation, 12 sets of the 30 books were given to the school.

Preschool instructors will be trained on the material and provided support to implement the STAR program, Hearn said.

“Even though they are not part of the schools, they are incredibly important,” he added. “At the bare minimal we are reaching out and saying we are here with the support. What are your biggest needs and how can we help with them?”

Focus on teaching

While writing the grant last year, the group realized the first step was to provide teachers with the tools to instruct literacy at the highest level.

The district is implementing the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling - LETRS - the gold-standard for literacy instruction in Ohio.

LETRS is not a curriculum or text book, rather it teaches teachers how to diagnose reading difficulties and prescribe solutions, Hearn said.

While the grant - Striving Readers - was not awarded, educators believed it was important to begin implementing any of the programs they could. The grant was co-written with Minerva Local and Brown Local schools.

“We spent a lot of time researching and going over the data and this is essential to moving forward,” Hearn said.

A number of organizations and individuals contributed, including Early Childhood Research Center, Stark County Educational Service Center, Stark Education Partnership and more.

The team of experts helped analyze data, recognize needs and design a plan to combat the problem.

It's not just parents that educators are trying to reach. They are also targeting their older students.

Kornish is working with the high school family and consumer science teacher to prepare the juniors and seniors for when they have children and how they can instill early literacy in their child.

The students also will host community nights when parents will be invited to learn what they can do to develop pre-reading skills with their children.

“When a child comes into kindergarten knowing how to hold a pencil or ready to read it makes a big difference,” Kornish said. “The kids are ready for it.”

Reach Amy at 33-775-1135 or amy.knapp@indeonline.com

On Twitter: [@aknappINDE](https://twitter.com/aknappINDE)