

WE BELIEVE

Education Changes Lives and Strengthens Communities



The power of education lies in its nature to change the lives of everyone who pursues it, often breaking the cycle of poverty and bolstering an engaged citizenry. Individuals who pursue some form of postsecondary education, including a license, certificate or degree, become part of a highly skilled, highly trained workforce that comprises the building blocks of an economically viable community. Helios' community investments become key pieces of a collaborative strategy to create college-going cultures and increase student achievement across the education continuum.

A few of the Foundation's initiatives that are helping strengthen communities include a school readiness effort in the Sulphur Springs neighborhood of Tampa, Florida, and a neighborhood literacy partnership program in Tucson, Arizona, involving multiple partners working in neighborhoods to ensure that children enter kindergarten ready to succeed and are reading at grade level by the end of third grade.

School Readiness in Sulphur Springs

With 90 percent of a child's brain being developed by age five¹, it is critical that all children are provided and exposed to quality early learning opportunities. Research indicates that children exposed to quality early learning environments are more likely to perform well academically, be more socially and emotionally well-adjusted, abstain from delinquent behavior and graduate from high school.

To provide the opportunity for more children ages birth to five, residing in four Tampa, Florida neighborhoods, to enter kindergarten with the cognitive and social emotional skills to be successful, Helios partnered with the United Way Suncoast to augment the local literacy efforts of nonprofit agencies and preschools that are providing books and other resources to low-income families with young children. This partnership's effectiveness has been attributed to its collaborative nature of generating locally driven, language development and early literacy priorities that address the unique needs of each neighborhood.

Sulphur Springs, once a thriving mineral springs tourist attraction in Tampa, is one of the four neighborhoods where this initiative is being implemented. The collaborative is helping Sulphur Springs develop its own strategic plan that includes access to and an increase in quality early learning environments; providing critical resources such as professional development, technical assistance, literary resources and cultural competency training for local pre-school teachers and practitioners combined with skilled volunteers knowledgeable about early childhood development.

This effort is raising awareness among parents and community leaders about the importance of early childhood education and the relationship of high quality learning environments to the development of age appropriate school readiness skills. One critical goal of the project is to increase the percentage of preschool aged children who will enter school with the skills, motivation and curiosity they need to succeed.

Make Way for Books in Tucson

A 2013 Stanford University study found that, by 18 months of age, toddlers from low-income families are several months behind their peers from higher-income families in vocabulary and in processing language². Children who arrive in kindergarten lacking emergent-literacy skills and with limited language development are at a disadvantage. Often, they are not reading at grade level and find it difficult to catch up with their peers in the early grades. Research indicates that high-quality preschool programs are a key variable in improving the school-readiness gap between children from low-income households and children from higher-income households².

In Tucson, Arizona, 39 percent of children ages birth to five live in poverty and are at risk of entering kindergarten unprepared³. To reach these children and ensure that they enter kindergarten ready to succeed, Helios is partnering with Make Way for Books as part of a community-based collaborative effort that includes the Tucson Unified School District and the United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona.

This initiative is focused on engaging families and making more early literacy opportunities available for economically disadvantaged children. At least seven out of 10 low-income children in the targeted neighborhoods do not have access to preschool or other high-quality, early learning programs.

Through the Make Way for Books local partnership, high-quality literacy activities are being provided at 48 community-based, early childhood centers and family child-care homes and preschools. This program is also creating a path for early childhood practitioners to access literacy and language development programs at 12 additional locations that are more accessible to them. Make Way for Books is recruiting families to participate in the Raising A Reader family engagement program, which promotes language acquisition and fosters pre-literacy skills by engaging parents in daily book sharing with their children. As the program continues to be implemented, the partners expect 150 early childhood teachers and practitioners to be impacted by this initiative and 6,900 children to develop pre-literacy skills that will better prepare them for literacy activities in the early grades.



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Raising A Reader helps connect families with local early childhood education teachers and practitioners and helps them access early language and literacy events that, when combined, create a coordinated and integrated system of programs that link and align the early childhood years to the K-3 grades. Coordinating and connecting these programs will ultimately support third-grade reading proficiency.

1. "School success begins at birth. The importance of Early childhood." First Things First. N.p. n. d. Web. 12 Mar. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.readyazkids.com/>
2. Fernald, A. , Marchman, V.A., & Weisleder, A. (2012) SES Differences in Language processing skill and vocabulary evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*, 16(2), pp234-248.
3. "Importance of Early Literacy." Make Way for Books, N.p n.d. Web. 12 Mar. 2015. Retrieved from www.makewayforbooks.org