



Solving the Reading Challenge for the Children of East San José

June 2009

If you find it difficult to accept that a high percentage of our children are not reading at grade level by third grade and you want to be part of an initiative designed to close the achievement gap, we encourage you to get involved in a project that will develop community-based solutions to improve student achievement.

This effort recognizes that families are at the heart of the issue and that they need to play a key role in finding and implementing solutions. The Yes We Can...Read!™ Program is founded in the belief that families have the internal capacity to be agents of change.

If you are concerned about the implications that poor reading scores have on our children's future and in the future of our community, please join this initiative. Together we can accomplish our goal and find solutions that, in the next five to seven years, will dramatically improve our children's reading ability.

We recognize that creating social change takes time and is not accomplished easily. Over the years, many groups committed to the East San José Community have attempted to address the low literacy levels. These efforts have made some impact, as reflected in the performance of the children's standardized test results; however, there is still much work to be done. The Yes We Can...Read!™ Program is focused on examining the issue, creating the same level of understanding among all stakeholders, and working collaboratively to create a solution. This document is to be used as a starting point for discussion.

Framework:

The East San José community has a rich history and traditions and is home to working families who want the best for their children's future. They are willing to do what it takes to get them ready to succeed. Families take pride in their culture, their traditions, and the success of their children.

The initiative will mobilize the community by creating long-term changes in attitudes held by its residents, businesses, local non profit organizations, local government, and other stakeholders as to what a community can do to embrace change.

The initiative is founded on the belief that a collaborative effort of talented people from diverse backgrounds in the community will embrace and ultimately make the needed changes for their children's futures. This program is based on the belief that the families living in this community, with the support of other stakeholders, can and will do what is needed to make this change.

The Yes We Can...Read!™ Program aligns with Santa Clara County's Children's Agenda by working on two of their thirteen indicators: Kindergarten Readiness and Third Grade Reading Scores.

The East San José community is in a unique position to make a change. Aside from the strength of the families who live in this community, there are currently several collaborative efforts in the community working to address the needs of families with young children and there are several not-for-profit organizations that have a long history of service to the community. The City of San José has identified the Mayfair community as part of their Strong Neighborhood Initiative process. Many efforts have been in place to empower residents, including the development of a community assessment, inviting residents to prioritize their needs and take responsibility for social issues affecting their lives.

Why do we need to start early?

The Yes We Can...Read!™ Program will target children from birth to age nine and their families. Children take their first steps toward being fully literate — defined as being able to read, write, understand, and communicate information and ideas — from the moment they are born ⁽¹⁾ Starting with such tasks as listening to language and making nonsense sounds, they progress to more complicated tasks such as speaking words and trying to understand symbols. Research has shown that early language and literacy development are strongly connected to a child's early experiences with books. Failing to expose children to various literacy experiences until they are of school age can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain.⁽¹⁾

Why do we need to involve parents?

The Carnegie Foundation Report "Ready to Learn, a Mandate for the Nation" (1991) found that only fifty percent of infants and toddlers are routinely read to by their parents. These findings are very much a reflection of the reality experienced by families in East San José. Data gathered through the Robert L. Seaverns Children's Library indicates that more than eighty percent of seven hundred and thirty families surveyed have fewer than ten books in their homes and are not reading to their young children on a regular basis; however, parents in focus groups indicate that they are interested in helping and supporting their children's learning activities. They find themselves with limited knowledge and information as to how to do it. Parents of children already enrolled in school also report that at times they are overwhelmed with the educational system and do not know how to develop strong communications with teachers⁽²⁾

Preliminary goals of the initiative are:

In the next five years:

- Every child will be ready to enter school prepared for kindergarten as demonstrated by being proficient in all four building blocks of kindergarten readiness: Self-Care and Motor Skills, Self Regulation, Social Expression and Kindergarten Academics.⁽³⁾
- Every parent will be knowledgeable about their role as their child's first and most important teacher and will actively engage in their child's learning experiences on a regular basis.
- All third graders will be reading at grade level in English or Spanish as demonstrated by the results of standardized testing, with the state target being that all students score at the proficient or advanced level.⁽⁴⁾

Beginning strategies:

Even though there have been many efforts in the community to address this literacy challenge, they are often isolated and extremely fragmented, leaving the issue unresolved. Some of the goals of this project are to achieve the same level of understanding for all stakeholders around the issue; to develop common strategies to address the problem; and to explore complementary, research-based approaches to programming. The following preliminary strategies are not unique and new to this community; however, what is new is the idea of building on existing partnerships that are currently addressing the needs of families with young children. It is also an opportunity to tap into other efforts that are working at the City and County levels and to incorporate the idea of "working at scale"⁽⁵⁾ This concept is a successful strategy for community transformation used in Dane County, Wisconsin. A series of community meetings will be hosted to get input and redefine goals and strategies. This document is only a starting point and should be used as such.

The following are some suggested strategies that could be adopted to address this challenge:

- A strong and well coordinated volunteer effort that will bring hundreds of mentors/volunteers to the community. These individuals, the Yes We Can...Read!™ Program Learning Partners, will make a significant commitment to read to children in the Elementary grades.

- Increased parent engagement so that every parent will be informed and involved in their children’s learning experiences by participating in parent education workshops, parent-child learning opportunity activities, parent-teacher communications, or an advocacy effort. Part of the parent advocacy role will be to take ownership of the idea that they are the “first and most important teacher of their children” ⁽⁶⁾ and that they will work in partnership with the schools.
- Collaborative advocacy that will make recommendations and explore public policy solutions to this issue.

The Need:

The California Standardized Testing and Reporting Report for 2007-2008 shows that for the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District in East San José, only 20% of third graders scored at or above the 50th percentile in Reading and only 33% of third graders scored at or above the 50th percentile in Language as measured by the CAT/6. According to the California Standards Test Summary Report, only 33.5% of second to eleventh graders tested at the Proficient or Advance level for English-Language Arts.⁽⁷⁾ Many of the children attending these schools have not been involved in any type of pre-school or Head Start program, and many of them did not attend Kindergarten. Many of these children are of Latino descent and their scores are representative of a crisis affecting Latinos at the national level: 56 percent of Latino fourth graders read below the basic level, which means they have difficulty reading and comprehending simple texts⁽⁸⁾. Of the remaining student sample, 29 percent read at the basic level, 15 percent read at the proficiency or advanced levels⁽⁹⁾. The efforts must begin at an early age, before they begin school. For these statistics to change, the involvement of parents, family members, and the community at large is critical.

At the County Level, fewer than fifty percent of children arrive to school proficient in all four building blocks of kindergarten readiness.⁽³⁾

Research shows that children who are not ready to read by third grade will have a difficult time catching up and some never do. It is important to address the issue of early literacy because the way children develop as readers will affect how well they do in school. The ability to read and understand complicated information is important to succeed in college and increasingly in the workplace. It is certainly an indicator of a healthier and more prosperous community.

According to the latest report prepared by the Rand Corporation on the “Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education [ECE] for Preschool-Age Children in California”: “Latinos and socio- economically disadvantaged children—those whose mothers have less education, with low family incomes, or in linguistically isolated families—participate in center-based ECE at lower rates than those in other racial-ethnic groups or who are more advantaged”. This is also the reality of children in East San José, where the need for child care and pre-school environments find their parents placing them on long waiting lists; limiting their opportunities for early care and education experiences that can prepare them for school.

The strategies envisioned in this initiative are just a starting point; the goal is for a true collaborative effort to emerge so that we can make the needed changes to address the challenges of early literacy.

The following is a partial list of organizations, groups and individuals who have been approached informally and have expressed interest in the further development and implementation of this initiative.

- Alum Rock Union Elementary School District
- Alum Rock Counseling Center
- AVANCE
- Bring Me a Book Foundation
- Catholic Charities
- David and Lucile Packard Foundation
- FIRST 5 Santa Clara County
- Junior League of San José
- Kids in Common
- KTEH-Early Learning

MACSA
Mujer a Mujer-Woman to Woman
Office of Council member Nora Campos
Project Cornerstone
San Jose City College
Read Aloud Collaborative of Santa Clara County
SOMOS Mayfair
Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness
Silicon Valley Community Foundation
United Way Silicon Valley
Vision Literacy

The initiative was launched with a community dialogue on June 19th 2009. If you are interested in getting involved, supporting this initiative, or learning more information about this effort, please contact Veronica Goei, Executive Director of Grail Family Services and Co Chair of the Yes We Can...Read!™ Program East San José Children's Initiative" at vgoei@gfsfamilyservices.org.

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1. Learning to Read and Write: Developing Appropriate Practices for Young Children, 1998
 2. GFS data collected through library card application and focus groups
 3. Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness and Applied Survey Research. Does Readiness Matter? How Kindergarten Readiness Translates into Academic Success, April 2008
 4. California Department of Education, Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program, August 2007
 5. Center for Community Leadership, United Way Dane County,
 6. Scholastic Inc Read and you will be. Lee y Serás®, 2006
 7. California Standardized Testing and Reporting, California Department of Education, 2009 <http://star.cde.ca.gov/start2008/>
 8. U.S Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 8. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), 1992, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003 Reading Assessments
 9. US Department of Education
 - 10 .Rand Corporation. Prepared to Learn. The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education for Preschool-Age Children in California, *Lynn A. Karoly, Bonnie Ghosh-Dastidar, Gail L. Zellman, Michal Perlman, Lynda Fernyhough, 2008*