

FORUM

Embracing the science of reading

BY ELIZABETH MOORE
and SHARON WORKMAN

We commend Traverse City Area Public Schools for embracing the science of reading curriculum to address the shocking decline in our children's reading ability (as reported Jan. 10-11 in the *Record-Eagle*). Fewer than 40% of third-graders are proficient readers; and only half of our community's children are entering kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed.

This is an urgent problem. Children who are not reading by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

While this new curriculum is one big step in the right direction, it is not enough. The foundation for literacy is built before children enter kindergarten. Ninety percent of brain development occurs by age 5. Babies are wired to learn through loving interactions with caregivers, laying the groundwork for literacy.

The first five years of life are a critical window for learning language. The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages new parents to begin reading at birth to create a language-rich environment that makes reading and learning a joy. When young children are read to, their vocabulary grows exponentially.

Research shows that reading aloud to a child every day, starting at birth, is the single most



Moore Workman

important thing we can do to ensure school success. Yet, many parents don't know how essential this simple practice is to their child's development. And technology is competing for our time and focus, making it harder for families to maintain reading routines.

In the Grand Traverse region, two local nonprofits, Sunrise Rotary's Born to Read and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library are working together with other community partners to change these trends and increase school readiness.

Through our 'Books from Birth' partnership, Born to Read provides every newborn at Munson Medical Center a gift bag with books and information for parents about the importance of reading with their baby, starting at birth. Staff at Munson encourage parents to sign up for the Imagination Library before leaving the hospital.

Once enrolled, the child receives an age-appropriate book from the Imagination Library every month until their 5th birthday. All children under 5 in the five-county Grand Traverse region are eligible to register. Books are free to participating

families. Both Born to Read and the local Imagination Library are run entirely by volunteers and supported by donors and grantors in our community.

Born to Read and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library also work with community schools, libraries, health clinics, day care centers, baby pantries, and others to distribute books, encourage parents to read with their children and register them to receive Imagination Library books.

Research shows this program works. Numerous peer-reviewed studies report that participating children are read to more often and gain kindergarten readiness skills. Starting in infancy matters. The longer a child is enrolled, the stronger the impact.

This investment in early childhood literacy, together with the innovative curriculum TCAPS is now implementing, promises to reverse declines in third-grade reading proficiency, increasing our children's success in school and in life.

For more information, please visit: rotaryborn-toread.org and dpil-gtre-gion.org

About the authors:

Elizabeth Moore is the main coordinator of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library GTR. Sharon Workman is co-chair of Sunrise Rotary Born to Read.