

Grant funds classes to boost pre-K reading readiness

By ARLA SHEPHARD
MASON COUNTY LIFE

Students who read below grade level in kindergarten and first grade have a more difficult time catching up to their peers' reading levels throughout the rest of their educational careers.

The data, from the non-profit Northwest Evaluation Association based on 8 million students nationwide, supports the idea that children need the tools to become successful readers early on, said Emily Ecker, program assistant at the South Sound Reading Foundation.

"Once they get to school, it's really hard to add on to the instruction of the limited hours their teachers have in a day," Ecker said. "So, not only do the kids need to get the regular growth in their literacy, but they're having to have an increased growth on top of that to match their peers."

Parents in the Shelton community have a unique opportunity to give their preschool-aged kids a leg up — the South Sound Reading Foundation received a \$22,000 grant to fund free classes for parents that focus on reading literacy, math literacy and emotional and social skills.

"The goal is to cater to the family and keep it fun," Ecker said. "The 0-5 years



PHOTO BY ARLA SHEPHARD

South Sound Reading Foundation is offering free classes for parents whose children will enter kindergarten in 2015 or 2016. Parents receive tools needed to help their child succeed in reading, math and social skills; child care is provided.

in a child's life, their brain is just so ready to learn. It's so important that when they get to kindergarten they're ready to go."

The Ready for Kindergarten program is for parents whose children will enter kindergarten in either 2015 or 2016.

Free child care will be provided and parents will receive games, activities and workbooks to use with their child at home throughout their elementary education.

Classes for the parents of preschool children enter-

ing kindergarten in 2016 will take place from 6-8 p.m., Thursdays, Feb. 19, March 19 and April 30 at Olympic Middle School, with child care provided at neighboring Mountain View Elementary.

Classes for parents of children entering kindergarten in 2015 take place from 6-8 p.m., Thursdays, Feb. 26, April 2 and May 7, also at Olympic Middle School.

Spanish-speaking parents of children entering kindergarten in 2015 can take the same class as English-speaking parents on the

same dates at Evergreen Elementary School. Child care will be provided on site.

Jennifer Forster-Williams, director of the South Sound Reading Foundation, has been working to get the research-based Ready for Kindergarten program to Mason County for years.

Several school districts across the state have implemented the program, funded through either the school district or local nonprofits, she said.

When the U.S. Department of Education award-

ed the National Children's Reading Foundation with a two-year \$3.8 million grant last year to provide literacy and early learning initiatives to schools across the country, Forster-Williams grew excited.

"I've been wanting this program since I started at South Sound Reading Foundation eight years ago," she said. "When I understood we could apply for this under the National Children's Reading Foundation and get it for free, I jumped on it."

South Sound Reading Foundation provides free books and other literacy programs to children throughout Mason and Thurston counties.

However, under the guidelines of the Dept. of Education grant, Shelton School District was the only district that qualified for the Ready for Kindergarten program because at least 25 percent of the population of the area lives below the federal poverty line, based on U.S. Census data.

"If they based it on school district, not census, data, I believe all districts in Thurston and Mason could receive this," Forster-Williams said. "We have schools with nearly 100 percent of kids on free or reduced-price lunch, but people live here whose income throws off the census data."

Studies have shown that

nearly 80 percent of children whose parents take part in the Ready for Kindergarten program meet the kindergarten reading readiness standard regardless of family income or ethnicity, compared with 55 percent of children whose parents do not attend, according to the National Children's Reading Foundation.

The South Sound Reading Foundation's grant will renew next year for the same amount, and the foundation plans to spread the classes out, with one class each season.

The grant covers the cost of the reading kits each parent will receive and also funds the preschool teachers who will be teaching the class.

Preschool teacher Lilly Serhan from Mountain View Elementary will teach the Spanish-language classes, while para-educator Rebecca Suhre, also from Mountain View Elementary, will teach the other classes.

Volunteers are needed to help register parents and help with child care. Donations to provide dinner at the classes will also be accepted.

"This really is a way of engaging families in more than literacy and early learning," Forster-Williams said. "We hope to keep this ongoing."

To register for the free parent classes, visit www.readyforkindergarten.org/south-soundrf or call 790-8913. ■



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