

## **THE VITAMINS R(READING) AND L(LITERACY) PROJECT IN TWIGGS**

### **An Early Language and Literacy Initiative**

Two ladies met for the first time at the First Inaugural Governor's Summit on Early Language and Literacy at Georgia College and State University. One recently began work at Mercer University School of Medicine and was a member of the Governing Board for the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy; she had never heard of Twiggs County. The other was a reading specialist and President of her company in Twiggs. They quickly recognized a shared desire to help children be better prepared for school. Immediately following the conference, they began working with others to write and implement a grant focused on language nutrition for two and three year olds in Twiggs County.

From over two-hundred applications to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement, the "Vitamins R (Reading) and L(Literacy) Project in Twiggs" grant was one of forty-one funded. Key agencies in the community serve as grant partners: Twiggs County Public Schools, Twiggs County Health Department, Twiggs County Public Library and Mercer University School of Medicine.

Sessions are held at Jeffersonville Elementary School during the school year and at Twiggs County Public Library during the summer. Many of the parents renewed or secured new library cards and children went home with books to be read aloud to them. Adults at the July session filled the meeting room, while the children were supervised and entertained by Twiggs County Middle/High School student volunteers and the TCPS Parent Engagement Coordinator.

Special highlights of this session were: having the Superintendent of Twiggs Public Schools speak to the group and give each family a gift; a presentation about the "Babies Can't Wait Program"; having representatives of Community Health Care Systems in Twiggs and Mercer University School of Medicine students prepare and distribute bags filled with healthy foods to each family; the families being presented copies of From Head to Toe by Eric Carle and matching activities for use at home; having the director of Twiggs County Department of Public Health learn about the grant; seeing the Twiggs County Public Library Director assist parents with checking out books; and welcoming a KaMin LLC representative as she provided sandwich boxes for each family during June and July.

The true beneficiaries of the grant are the children and caregivers who attend monthly meetings. Books, research findings about reading aloud and increasing the language of young children, and bags of healthy foods filled with nutritious vitamins go home with the participants monthly. The grant was written to serve ten families, but the number of participants has grown from four to eleven. The grant sessions will continue through December 2019 with new books and vocabulary

building activities each month. Success has led to discussion of ways to continue the program in the community beyond that point.

Assessment of the children from beginning to end of the eighteen-month program is measuring their growth in *Receptive Language* (words they understand when they hear them) and *Expressive Language* (words they actually can say). Observation of the children and current assessment results show much progress is being made. From the beginning, the focus of all involved has been having these children, and all others their age, reading on grade level by the end of third grade. All involved know about the strong research tied to this need.

A Twiggs Leadership Retreat was held February 2019 with discussion among city, county, regional and business leaders about the needs and opportunities for the county. Education was highlighted as both a concern and an area of growth. A follow-up retreat was held in August 2019 to review progress and identify three specific goals to target. Each of the thirty-six participants was asked to bring a project to share.

Grant team participants presented handouts about the “Vitamins R(Reading) & L(Literacy) Project in Twiggs”. Following presentations and small group discussions on twelve different project topics, participants were asked to select which projects they supported. The grant came in as #2! The #1 choice was housing, a tremendous need in the community.

Twenty five percent of the participants agreed immediately to expand the project in two ways. First, as a volunteer to read aloud on Tuesday mornings to children in the waiting room at the Department of Health. Second to replicate the project in two local churches. Everything is ready to support both of these choices. The core components of this project will benefit young children in Twiggs for years to come!