

Rotary Club of Fairbanks Sunrisers
District Grant
Focus area Literacy
By PDG Andre' Layral

Schools in communities all over Alaska are facing deep funding shortfalls. This comes at a time when there are concerns about student achievement, particularly in the areas of reading and math. The State of Alaska has been promoting its Alaska Reads Program and school districts are doing what they can, despite being asked to do more with less. School leaders are having conversations to answer the question, "what can we do to better equip students with the skills they need, without badly needed resources for implementing the Alaska Reads program"?

Last spring our Fairbanks Sunrisers Rotary Club considered several potential unmet needs in our community and settled on applying for a small Rotary District Grant funds to support literacy. Our club had never previously applied for a Literacy Grant. We considered either an early childhood approach (working with young families) or working with Title 1 (low socio- economic) schools in Fairbanks. After a meeting with the Title 1 Coordinator for the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District we concluded there was already reliable baseline data available for measuring reading improvement over the course of the school year.

Nearly all the 14 Title 1 schools in the district indicated interest in partnering with Rotary. Schools qualify as Title 1 when 40% or more of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. We chose two schools, Hunter Elementary (a longtime Title 1 school) and University Park Elementary (the newest Title 1 school).

Improving reading is a complex challenge often influenced by factors outside the control of local schools. These challenges include: Access to Resources, Poverty, School Transiency rates (frequent moves), Language Barriers for 2nd Language students, Learning Disabilities, Student Motivation, Parental Engagement (family support), Education Level of Parents to name just a few. The above challenges can pose a barrier for improving reading skills.

The hours after school, before parent(s) come home, are most critical. There is a convincing research that indicates children spend more of their waking hours outside of school hours at home alone. Therefore, family, neighbors, relatives, and after school youth programs can all play a critical role in raising student achievement. Far too many Title 1 students leave school to an empty home after school with "nothing special to do" because their parent(s) work one or more jobs. Those 2-4 hours immediately after school can make a world of difference if students have a caring adult or youth program available to them after school.

Factors affecting raising achievement: **Regular school attendance:** ALL students do better when they attend school regularly. When kids aren't regularly in school, they often face learning gaps. **Proper reading assessments:** ALL students read better when their vocabulary is growing as they comprehend more of what they are reading. Reading at the correct Lexile level contributes to comprehension skills growing. **Student engagement and connectedness:** "Students don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." A single teacher or staff member can make a world of difference.

Because a kind word, encouragement, recognition and caring contributes to bonding and connectedness and also positive attitudes about learning. Therefore, Sunrisers Rotary asked what would be support each school's current efforts. Both schools proposed our District grant funds be used for small group luncheons with the principal and reading aides each month where

teachers can nominate students to receive recognition that improve attendance, study habits, positive learning behaviors, and observed improvements over time in reading and math. They proposed Root Beer Float celebrations for students that participate in various school-wide reading challenges. Three times a year school staff analyze data on students reading improvement. Sunrisers provides all students with bookmarks, and will purchase school spirit items as prizes for students showing academic growth. Parent engagement is valued, therefore, Sunrisers Rotary will provide support for periodic school sponsored parent learning sessions over the course of the school year, geared to helping parents with skills for improved reading and math.

If any clubs are interested in learning more about our District Grant for literacy, they may contact Rotarians Andre' Layral, Lynsey Jemmet or Janet Brown.

We met with both school principals and a few of their staff and asked what Rotary could do to help their current efforts raising achievement. We learned their schools could not use Title 1 funds for recognition lunches, snacks, incentives and coupons for school pride items.

Therefore, our club is using our District Grant funds for twice monthly small groups twice monthly lunches for 20 students each, where the principal congratulates ALL students on their improvements in attendance, reading and math proficiency, academics, positive behaviors with peers, and participation in school wide reading initiatives. Students all receive certificates and bookmarks, and we have discussed possibly helping purchase some trade books for high flyers. There are plans to engage parents by offering educational workshops geared toward helping their children at home.