READING WELL IN WICHITA

6/12/2015

A Report for the Wichita Community Foundation on Improving Literacy in our Community
Executive Summary

The Wichita Community Foundation (WCF) is considering a project to improve literacy achievement for Wichita-area students and is looking to involve corporate partners, parents, volunteers, community members and others to achieve this goal. A community-wide campaign is a concentrated effort to promote activity (in this case, reading) using a variety of methods delivered in multiple settings. This activity generally involves many community sectors and partnerships, are large in scale and require high-intensity efforts with sustained high visibility using a variety of communication techniques to develop the activity campaign messages.

Transformative Concepts Consulting Group (TCCG) was commissioned to conduct research and provide recommendations that will assist WCF in making informed decisions about whether/how to proceed with efforts to impact literacy achievement in Wichita. The resulting research highlights critical considerations for creating such an initiative.

Our research included a survey and focus groups to assess the perceived needs, feasibility and projected benefits of a literacy initiative in Wichita, KS. Additionally, a literature review was conducted to ascertain best practices for improving literacy outcomes for school-aged children, and to look at the community engagement programs, projects and initiatives across the nation that have attempted to assist in the reduction of the literacy achievement gap. Our research on best approaches to improving literacy outcomes for students in the Wichita Public Schools is grounded in the social determinants of health framework as advanced by the World Health Organization in its Healthy People 2020 initiative.

A large body of evidence links educational attainment to better health outcomes even when other factors, like income, are taken into account. Lifespan has been directly linked to levels of educational attainment, showing that people with more education are likely to live longer, to experience better health outcomes and to practice health-promoting behaviors. Gaps in literacy achievement can cost communities in many ways, including increased health care costs, a dearth of employable citizens, high unemployment, high crime, decreased tax base and low civic engagement.

Five essential components have been found to have the most impact on reading ability:

1. Recognizing and using individual sounds to create word or phonemic awareness;
2. Understanding the relationship between letters and spoken sounds;
3. Reading fluency, or the ability to read a text accurately and automatically;
4. Vocabulary development, or learning the meaning and pronunciation of words; and
5. Reading comprehension strategies - acquiring strategies to understand, remember and communicate what is read.

New research underscores the importance of enriched home learning environments and parent engagement in preparing children from low-income families to succeed in school. Research has also identified several factors that contribute to a child’s ability to
learn to read and continue learning. These are: 1) entering school ready to learn; 2) school attendance; 3) summer learning; and 4) family support.

Wichita is fortunate to have a great number of organizations and programs that focus on literacy, and a school district committed to making the necessary changes and improvements to advance literacy achievement. More than half of the elementary, K-8 and middle schools under the Wichita Public Schools purview are Title 1 schools, meaning that they are beneficiaries of part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which is the foundation of the federal commitment to closing the achievement gap between low-income and other students. However, challenges persist.

Based on input from survey respondents and focus groups participants, along with the literature review, we were able to begin identifying and assessing examples of efforts in other communities (or national efforts), that meet most or some of the criteria that the research (including the literature review and community input) deem most effective in meeting most, if not all of the identified challenges. Detailed overviews of some of these are included in the Appendix.

Our research suggests that the most effective community-wide response will require more in-depth input from and collaboration with a wider range of public and private actors, from parents to corporate and educational leaders, to funders. Thus, our recommendations center on bringing all of these entities together to further explore needs, resources, policies and practices and on how to formulate a comprehensive response to our community’s literacy challenges. If the Wichita Community Foundation desires to initiate such an effort, our recommendation is for a community-wide summit that leverages the Foundations connections and resources, and invites, engages, includes and involves every community sector impacted by the issue. This would include parents as well as policy-makers, inviting all sectors to the table with equal standing for discussion, exploration, issue identification, goal-setting and strategic planning. Other important considerations for developing such a summit are included at the end of this report.

*The Transformative Concepts Consulting Team*