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Preschools or Prisons?

St. Augustine, FL—Growing mountains of research suggest that the best way to address economic inequality, poverty and especially crime is — you guessed it! — early education programs, including coaching of parents who want help. It's not a magic wand, but it's the best tool we have to break cycles of poverty. The St. Johns County Education Foundation (SJCEF) realized this and, as a result, is one of the key stakeholders in the School Readiness Task Force. The task force, comprised of several organizations, has been looking at the impact of early learning in children 0 to 5 years and how crime can increase if these children do not have a strong foundation of early learning and literacy.

Children need a good start in life to develop into healthy adults. In some states, the future prison bed growth is determined by 3rd grade literacy rates. A critical element is calling for an investment in early childhood education. "High-quality early education programs not only mean fewer children repeating a grade or needing special education, they also mean greater productivity and less crime," stated former Montana Representative Denny Rehberg, "We spend \$75 billion each year to incarcerate criminals but only \$3.6 billion on early-childhood education. As the saying goes, pay me now or pay me later. Let's start now."

SJCEF has recently applied for and received a grant that will provide each St. Johns County School District Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) Classroom and select community-based private VPK classrooms the full-range BrightStart! early literacy curriculum, together with training for teachers.

Nemours BrightStart! has developed a unique program specifically designed for teaching early literacy skills to small groups of at-risk pre-k students to build reading readiness skills in struggling learners. The curriculum focuses on teaching critical emergent literacy skills, including rhyming, alliteration, print and letter knowledge in a hands-on, child-centered approach.

The pilot program will consist of four pull-out intervention teachers. Two intervention teachers will be assigned to The Webster School; one intervention teacher will be assigned to South Woods Elementary Pre-K; and one intervention teacher will be assigned to Brandt's Child Care and Brighton Day Academy.

All kindergarten-bound students in the St. Johns County School District (SJCS D) and at the community-based private VPK programs have participated in pre-testing to identify struggling readers. Currently, 177 SJCS D students have been tested; 86 of the students qualify for BrightStart! intervention. Fifteen students have been identified at the community-based private VPK classrooms. Those students will be placed in small groups and will receive intervention from November 2013 through March 2014. Post-testing will occur in April.

The School Readiness Task Force will be seeking a part-time director to oversee the program in the near future. For more information, please contact Donna Lueders at 547-7120 or luederd@stjohns.k12.fl.us.

The St. Johns County Education Foundation is recognized as the direct support organization for the St. Johns County School District. The SJCEF leads efforts to provide funding opportunities, supports initiatives that enhance public education and recognize and inspire teachers and students within St. Johns County.

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