Libraries Support Read to Lead Task Force Recommendations

By Rhonda Puntney Gould

The Wisconsin Read to Lead Task Force recently released important recommendations to improve literacy in Wisconsin by ensuring that each child can read by the end of 3rd grade. I applaud the attention to children’s literacy; after all, in my career as a youth services librarian and consultant to libraries, I have been connecting children with books and getting them excited about reading for many years. As the immediate past president of the Wisconsin Library Association, I want to remind teachers and parents alike about important role that all school and public libraries and librarians play in developing literacy skills.

As a youth services consultant for a public library system in southeastern Wisconsin, part of my job responsibilities including coordinating summer library programming for our fifteen member libraries in Racine and Walworth Counties. I work with the libraries to encourage literacy for children and their families. As any youth services librarian will tell you, a large part of what we do EVERY DAY is encourage children to read.

We begin encouraging reading at birth. Most public libraries provide storytime programming for babies and toddlers, focusing on early literacy skills and modeling literacy behaviors for parents and caregivers to continue at home. We then progress to programming for preschoolers, providing safe and nurturing environments and encouraging these children to continue building on their literacy skills.

In fact, Wisconsin has a rich history of providing such programming. Public librarians in Wisconsin were among the first to provide library programming for school aged children as early as 1898. And the Racine Public Library has the distinction of providing the first preschool time in the United States on February 10, 1932. In 2010, programs provided by Wisconsin’s public libraries that were geared toward children had an attendance of over 1.6 million. Summer library program attendance for children and young adults was nearly 500,000.

A study conducted in 2006 on the benefits of school library media programs commissioned by the Department of Public Instruction showed that student test scores at all grade levels were higher when the school libraries had full-time certified staff who collaborated with planning and teaching with classroom teachers. And the role of school librarians in promoting literacy and instilling in children a love of reading cannot be dismissed.

I’d like to think the task force recommendations that encourage parental involvement were written with the school and public libraries in mind. “Support should be given to programs that put books into the hands of low-income children and encourage parents and caregivers to read to children.” Wisconsin’s librarians are already doing this, and we’ve been doing so for over 110 years.
It’s encouraging that Governor Walker, who chaired the task force, chose to promote the task force recommendations by reading in a school library. I trust that this is truly the beginning of a conversation about how libraries can work more closely with other educators to improve literacy in our state.

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