

“Read Together” Program Reaches Boise LEP Families Thanks to Wal-Mart Grant

The **Boise Public Library** staff know all too well the challenges facing the growing refugee population, as well as the challenges of Idaho’s English Language Learners (ELL). They were one of 14 recipients of Wal-Mart mini-grants this past year and have been using their \$10,000 grant award to launch “Read Together,” a new series of storytimes for Limited English Proficient (LEP) families.

According to the Boise School District website, the LEP subpopulation is by far the fastest growing in the District. Students from all parts of the world, speaking over 80 languages, now make Boise home and attend its schools. In response, the District now has elementary programs for LEP students at 11 magnet sites where certified ELL teachers and assistants provide integrated language and content instruction. Secondary students receive support through the Language Academy, ELL Study Skills, in-class support, and sheltered content classes. However, as Idaho is one of only 12 states in the U.S. that does not provide state funding for pre-kindergarten classes (National Institute for Early Education, 2007) the need to provide language experiences for our youngest LEP children still must be met.

The Boise Public Library is now providing “Read Together” storytimes targeted for preschool children and their parents who are learning the English language. The storytimes are based on a model used by the Johnson County Library in Kansas, and are designed especially for preschoolers whose first language is not English. Emphasis is on familiar themes, shorter stories, traditional nursery rhymes, fingerplays and songs with lots of repetition and opportunities to participate. Follow-up activities are planned to reinforce new English vocabulary, and time to visit with other participants is offered after the 30-minute storytime.



ESL instructor Kate Hoff, facilitating a storytime at the International Rescue Committee offices in Boise.

The first two sessions recently concluded, and more sessions are planned for the spring. Youth services librarian Tobie Garrick said, “We’ve used these first two as pilots and have discovered some important information that we’ll use in planning the next four.” One of the programs was held at the Library! at Hillcrest on Saturdays, and the other was at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) offices on Mondays in the early afternoon. Though the Saturday program was not well-attended, the IRC program had between eight and 12 people who attended consistently. Two English as a Second Language instructors are facilitating the storytimes, Kate Hoff and Danyelle Quincy Davis. RTM Coordinators Staci and Peggy attended the last storytime session at the IRC and chatted with Kate about the success of the program so far.

According to Kate, one of the challenges for families has been transportation. Buses are sometimes late, attendees occasionally miss the bus, or bus service to the location is limited. The programs will not continue during the winter because many families have to walk long distances. Another challenge is that the concept of time is not the same in some other cultures, and “start times” are not a priority for some of the attendees. The staff involved with the project will meet to debrief the first sessions and brainstorm some solutions.

Overall, Kate has been impressed with the level of engagement from the children and parents who attend the programs, and feels the storytimes are providing rich language experiences. Kate said that at the first program the kids were running around a lot and didn't really understand that the idea was to participate in the activities and stories. By the last sessions the kids knew to come in and sit in the circle, and they really got into the swing of storytime. She was amazed at how much English language imitating one three year-old boy was willing to try by the last session, because he had been virtually silent for the first weeks. Kate has seen an increase in the participants' use of English, especially in the children, and she thinks the experience strengthens the parents' levels of trust and comfort. “We've all made some really good friends!”