



BRIGHT SPOTS

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Phoenix-area families have an unusual opportunity to find out if their young child is a struggling reader, thanks to free reading screenings offered at the library for kindergarten through third-grade students.

“We’re not diagnosing dyslexia or learning disabilities. But we are able to identify red flags and provide guidance to the parent,” says Linda Barr, education director of the Arizona Literacy & Learning Center (ALLC) in Phoenix, a nonprofit partnering on the screenings with the Phoenix Public Library. Both belong to the area’s grade-level reading coalition. “We hope to reduce the impact of reading disabilities through early identification and intervention. The earlier intervention can be provided, the better chance the student has for success.”

Offered one Saturday a month at the main library, the screening lets a family know if their child is reading at grade level (or below or above); pinpoints areas to work on; and even predicts the child’s reading ability in third and eighth grades. Parents receive resources about what to do next — at home and at school — including referrals for more screening and evaluation.

“It tells parents exactly where the weaknesses are and how much intensity is needed” to address them, says Barr. Because parents often find it daunting to request additional help and testing, “we give them information about how to talk to the school and this nice report that backs up what they’re saying.”

With some families coming from as far as Tucson, the program plans to expand, offering 25 screening events during the next fiscal year at the main library and others in metropolitan Phoenix. Available to all on a first-come-first-serve basis, the program served about 129 children in the last fiscal year.

Originally in four libraries, the five-year-old program is funded by the Phoenix Public Library, local Target stores and Seasons for Sharing, a local charitable campaign. ALLC has provided affordable screenings, diagnosis and treatment for people with learning disorders since 1987. This includes screenings throughout the community of children ages 3 to 5 to identify early developmental delays.

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Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. They are written and produced by the Campaign. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

Last year, the library-based program began using the Predictive Assessment of Reading (PAR), an evidence-based, normed test. The roughly 30-minute process includes a 10-minute session where a screener works one-on-one with a child, assessing four skills needed to learn to read and keep growing in reading skills. These include “phonemic awareness” (understanding individual sounds in a word) and “letter-word calling” (looking at a word and pronouncing it correctly).

A computer generates a results report, in English or Spanish, that is discussed with the parents, in English or Spanish. “Some parents have more questions or their children are really far behind,” says Suzanne Brimley, ALLC executive director. “So we tend to meet with them a little longer because they need guidance on how to request help from the school and what to say.”

Offering the screenings in the community at the library on a walk-in basis is a comfortable, easy option for low-income families who often are already library regulars and otherwise may not set up a screening appointment elsewhere. “We get so many kids because of that,” says Barr.

“The librarians noticed the need first. They would have parents come in saying ‘The teacher says my child really needs help, what can I do?’” Other times, parents detected reading issues at home that the teacher, busy working in a full classroom, could not.

Each family leaves with resources about community services on everything from parenting to library story times, activities to do at home and a free children’s book. Parents, in turn, often leave behind written comments such as:

- “Thank you for the feedback and ideas. We can use them to improve her reading.”
- “I’m very new to finding out about dyslexia and the information provided better helps to make informed decisions about my child.”
- “Thanks. It was nice to get some questions answered.”

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