



Child literacy program internationally recognized

By RICHARD B. GOLDBLOOM
 Wed, Oct 15 - 6:55 AM

A recent editorial in The Chronicle Herald correctly made a powerful case for encouraging early child development as a key to our children's future happiness and economic success. The editorial quotes a stirring challenge, issued by former bank executive Charles Coffey, for Canada to improve its investment in programs that support early learning.

Nova Scotia can be proud of leading the charge on this important issue. Over half the province's population struggles with basic reading and writing; and on the principle that "it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," a collaboration of partners, in 2002, launched Read to Me!, a program that illuminates early learning for every child born in Nova Scotia.

Of all the factors that contribute to a child's early development, none is more important, more accessible and more modifiable than the acquisition of good literacy skills at the earliest possible age, and science strongly suggests that right after birth is not a moment too soon. Nothing offers a better guarantee of good literacy skills than reading to children as early and as often as possible. From birth, infants are listening, watching and experiencing the world around them. Experience is the architect of the developing brain; and in the pre-school years, before children begin formal education, families provide that experience needed to build a strong foundation for learning later in life. The Read to Me! program provides families with the tools they need to give their baby this strong foundation.

Every month across Nova Scotia, more than 700 new families in 11 hospitals are counselled on early development and on the importance of reading to their babies, every day if possible. They are also given a bag of books and literacy materials at the hospital bedside within 24 hours of the birth of the child. Delivering the program in hospitals drives home the important connection between literacy and health. Each family receives three high quality baby books chosen by experts in children's literature.

Since its launch, Read to Me! has blanketed the province with over 48,000 bags and 110,000 free books for new families. The program has provided materials in French, Arabic and Chinese, and a Mi'kmaq Read to Me! bag is in development. The program also links families to important developmental resources in their community, such as libraries and family resource centres.

Read to Me! is headquartered in the IWK Health Centre, where 50 per cent of Nova Scotia's newest citizen are born each year, and is governed by an independent board. From the outset, the founders made a policy decision to assure the program's continuation in perpetuity with the establishment of an endowment of at least \$6 million. Over 81 per cent of that goal has been realized and we will soon be able to ensure the gift of books to every child in the province forever.

Key to this success has been the support of the government of Nova Scotia, through its departments of Health, Education and Community Services. This has been a "public/private partnership" of the very best kind. Other key partners have been the Halifax Youth Foundation, HRSDC, CBC, the libraries which deliver the book bags to the 10 obstetrical hospitals outside of Halifax, and of course, the IWK which provides the space from which the program operates. In addition, Dexter Subaru has provided us with a Subaru Legacy affectionately known as the "Readmobile," used to take the program to participating hospitals.

Dr. Cyndi Brannen, IWK research associate, and Stephanie van Zanten, now a medical student, have conducted research which compared families in Nova Scotia who had

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received the Read to Me! bag and families in P.E.I. who did not receive books and counselling on early development at the birth of their baby. Results showed that 74 per cent of families who received the bag reported reading to their children seven days a week, compared with only 53 per cent of families in P.E.I. This study also showed families who received the program read and sang to their baby more and watched television less. A recent grant of \$251,000 from the Canadian Institute for Health Research will continue this research with an evaluation of the impact of newborn family literacy programs in the three Maritime provinces.

Read to Me! is not only grounded in solid science, but is based on the economic principle that investing in the early years yields significant benefits in improved education, skills and health. This particular investment in Nova Scotia is starting to pay off. The very first child to receive the Read to Me! bag is now in Grade 1. Her parents report that she loves books and is already reading above grade level. Stories like this are being repeated across the province as the first wave of Read to Me! babies enter the school system with stronger language and literacy skills.

This model for early development has received international recognition. Read to Me! has been nominated for the 2009 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. Named after the beloved author of Pippi Longstocking, the Swedish award carries a cash prize of \$700,000.

Through a strong web of partnerships, Nova Scotia has made an important investment in the health, happiness, educational and economic success of the province's future citizens.

'Read to Me! provides families with the tools they need to give their babies a strong foundation for learning later in life.'

RICHARD B. GOLDBLOOM

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