

# State Grant Supports Education at Home

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We all want what is best for the children in our community, and understanding the importance of education early in their lives is the best way to support successful futures for our children.

Waiting until a child is five years old and ready to enter kindergarten is five years too late to begin their education. The first five years of a child's life is a crucial period of brain development. Those earliest learning experiences, from a baby's smile to learning how to talk and read, provide the base for future learning.

All children deserve to enter school ready and able to be successful, but far too many beginning students are not ready for the first day of school. When that's the case, these children often continue to fall further behind their better prepared peers and require extensive support throughout their educational careers.

The education of children takes the entire community. Without the collaboration and support of their families and other community agencies, schools cannot ensure a child will reach his potential. Whitfield County Schools recognizes the importance of building relationships with community partners, and we seek opportunities to join hands and form an educational safety net for our young children. This commitment led us to apply for an Innovation grant from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement. The grant team included Whitfield County Schools, Early Education Empowerment Zone (E3Z) personnel, and Dalton State College.

The state grants are awarded to systems that design a project to improve student performance by addressing a significant challenge in education. Whitfield County's challenge is to get all children ready to enter school. Our grant application concentrates on language and literacy development for children from birth to age eight. Our team designed and is implementing a literacy program that integrates Learning Academies and Power Lunches for high-need children and their families. Whitfield County Schools was selected to receive a \$10,000 Planning Grant for our proposal entitled "Beyond the Classroom."

We are taking the school to the community. Parent and children Learning Academies are being held at Cedar Ridge Elementary during March and April. Dr. Sharon Hixon from Dalton State College leads workshops for preschool children and their families. Educational professionals and teacher candidates from Dalton State model language and literacy activities that can easily continue at home. These activities stimulate required skills for pre-literacy development, and the families practice the modeled skills during the workshop. Event organizers provide tote bags with books and literacy supplies during these sessions to use at home. Another community partner, First Baptist Church of Dalton, has supplied food boxes from the food bank for three of these meetings.

Another component of our grant involves summer Power Lunches. Whitfield County Schools provides thousands of meals to young people every summer at various feeding sites around the county. Research documents that summer learning loss occurs every year while students are on break from school. This summer, WCS and its partners plan to integrate literacy with the lunches with support for children from birth to age eight in areas of the community with the greatest needs. Under the guidance of educational professionals from Dalton State College, teacher candidates and volunteers will create and design language and literacy lessons aligned to the Georgia Standards. They will teach these lessons with families at two community sites as part of the pilot study.

The collaboration between the school system and our community partners is exciting! We are working together to support our children and build trust between home and school. We are confident the pilot will be successful and look forward to applying for an implementation grant next fall so that we can expand this support to other areas of our county.