



## FERST FOUNDATION FOR CHILDHOOD LITERACY

### An Investment in Young Minds

For many children, bedtime is a ritual that includes brushing teeth, a glass of water, and of course, a favorite book read by mom or dad. But many Georgia households have no age-appropriate books available for children's growing minds. This problem is especially prevalent in low-income households – 61% of low-income families do not have a single book suitable for a child.

A home without age-appropriate books is more than just an unfortunate byproduct of poverty. It is a condition that has broad ramifications for Georgia – most notably in children's ability to arrive at school prepared to learn. A national study revealed that for children less than three years of age, success in learning language is a critical building block for success in school and depends on the opportunity to learn language skills in the **home environment**.<sup>1</sup>

One of the easiest ways to improve a child's school preparedness is to read to him or her daily. But many parents, even parents who are not economically or educationally challenged, may not be aware that having books available and reading to their children are among the most important things they can do. A recent study shows that regardless of a child's economic status, children who have children's books and music available in their homes displayed higher levels of reading knowledge and skills than did their counterparts who grow up in less rich home literacy environments.<sup>2</sup>

It is in our best interest to help provide a rich home literacy environment for all Georgia's children because the return on investment is so great. In fact, economic studies suggest that investments in quality child care and **education for children in their preschool years** provide a return of up to 20 percent.<sup>3</sup> It's too late to wait until

they enter school to start them on the path to successful reading. So how can we ensure that young children have age appropriate books to read and parents understand that they need to read to their kids? The Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy has an answer.

**Background:** In 1999, Robin Ferst, a Georgia native, read an article in the newspaper that opened her eyes to the issues of childhood literacy. The article featured Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a program started in 1996 by Ms. Parton for Sevier County in her native Tennessee. Each child registered in the Imagination Library program received a book each month until the age of five, paid for by Ms. Parton's Dollywood Foundation. For these first three years the books were distributed only to these Tennessee children.

After reading about that program, Robin Howser formed the Ferst Foundation with a mission to offer the Imagination Library to all of Georgia's children by 2010. The Foundation strives to improve early childhood learning for every child regardless of income, race, Religion or gender with the philosophy that any child who cannot read is at-risk.

Now, after five successful years, mailing more than 250,000 books to over 17,000 Georgia pre-school age children, the Ferst Foundation wants to expand its presence around the state to include the Georgia counties with the lowest literacy rates.

**Ferst Foundation is striving to include all of the Georgia preschool-age children in our exciting program. Literacy is at the heart of economic development. It is the single factor that underpins most social issues. People who struggle daily for survival and have done so for generations don't know that education is the way out. They don't know that it begins with reading to their children. We want to raise expectations with the hope that in 18 years, we will have raised a generation of readers.**

- Robin Ferst Howser



**How the Program Works:** Children registered for the Ferst Foundation program receive a book at their homes every month through the U.S. mail until their fifth birthday. If they are registered as soon as they are born,

<sup>1</sup> Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," *American Educator*, Spring 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *The Condition of Education 2003*. National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education

<sup>3</sup> *The Economics of Education*, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education and The Georgia Chamber of Commerce

each child will receive up to 60 free books for his/her own personal library. A committee at the Dollywood Foundation, made up of education and child development experts, academicians and early childhood literacy specialists, carefully select the books for this home library. The children's classic, The Little Engine That Could, is the first book of each child receives and Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come! is the final "graduation" book that is received when the child turns five.

As the program's mission grew to include parent assistance and additional literacy support materials, the Foundation adopted a new name – the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy. The Foundation continues to send the books from *Dolly Parton's Imagination Library* in conjunction with enhancements from its second literacy support initiative, *Leap Into Books*.

*Leap Into Books* serves to enhance the personal library providing the following for each child enrolled in the Ferst Foundation program:

- a "Ferst" library card designed to initiate the life-long relationship with the local public library
- a Parent's Guide with tips for parents on how to read aloud with their child
- a coupon for a distinctive set of locomotive and caboose bookends that is free of charge to the family
- a monthly newsletter for families featuring a book guide for parents, a child activity page, and opportunities for local community literacy announcements and sponsor acknowledgements.

**Impressive Results:** Since delivering its first book to a Georgia child in 2000, the Ferst Foundation for Childhood Literacy has produced impressive results. In a 2003 evaluation conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, **85% of parents with children enrolled in the Ferst program reported that they read with their child almost once a day or more.** Moreover, the study concluded that "parents overwhelmingly report that [the] program is effective at increasing time spent reading with children, making children more interested in books, making parents more comfortable reading to children, and increasing parent awareness of their children's reading levels."

On a local level, the earliest community to initiate the program has tracked the result of their kindergarten readiness test results to demonstrate the difference that Ferst Foundation can make. **In 2001, 46% of the Ferst Foundation children passed the test; only three years later in 2004, that number jumped to 90%! With these phenomenal results, the Ferst Foundation envisions serving all of Georgia's 600,000 children under the age of five by 2010.**

### **Imagine the Possibilities!**

**"The Ferst Foundation program helps enrich my son's life one book at a time, and it saddens me to know that all children don't have that privilege."**

**-Parent from Seminole County**



**How the Program is Funded:** The cost of the program, \$35 per year per child, is raised locally through donations from individuals, corporate sponsorships and grants. The Dollywood Foundation has negotiated with book manufacturers so that the annual cost of the books is approximately \$30 – a remarkable value. The \$5 balance helps pay for the mailing expenses, the Ferst Foundation's *Leap Into Books* program, as well as a minimal amount of overhead for registration and database management.

The goal is that every county pay for its own participation in the program through local fund-raising efforts, spearheaded by Community Action Teams, or CATs. A CAT acts as each county's local champion, and is ultimately responsible for raising the \$35 per year needed for each child who participates in the program.

Currently, the Ferst Foundation is operating in 36 counties, and has pilot urban programs in Atlanta in the John Hope Elementary School District and the G.O. Bailey School District in Tift County.

**"Literacy is one of the basic issues and the most important, fundamental need to be addressed in developing a workforce."**

**Leland A. Sanders, Director of  
Manufacturing, TEMCOR in Rincon, GA**



**A Remarkable Return:** As the Ferst Foundation moves into new counties in Georgia, we have a unique opportunity to invest in the education of young Georgians in a way that will have a huge economic impact in the years to come. For \$35 a year, we can help provide a library for children who may otherwise have little or no access to books.

Children who learn to appreciate books at an early age become lifelong readers and better learners. They are more prepared when they enter school and are more likely to stay in school and earn their diploma. Consequently, major employers will be better able to look within the state for its workers, rather than having to recruit from out of state as is too often currently the case. And at \$35 per child per year, a very small investment for a return that is enormous.



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