

Thomas County Schools lands 2.7 million dollar grant to boost literacy skills

Last Friday, the Georgia Department of Education awarded the Thomas County School System a 2.7 million dollar grant to assist the district in implementing a comprehensive literacy plan for children in Thomas County from birth through eighth grade.

The Striving Reader competitive grant was awarded based on the quality of the proposal and the capacity of the system to implement the plan. Thomas County's plan places a heavy focus on reading and writing in all content areas and on vocabulary development.

The purpose of the grant is to improve students' ability to communicate effectively with others, to think and respond critically in a variety of settings to a myriad of print and non-print text, and to access, use, and produce multiple forms of media, information, and knowledge in all content areas.

Grant funds will allow the district to enhance and expand many of its current initiatives, to accelerate the implementation of its technology plan, and to broaden the reach of the school system to pre-school age children, birth to age 5.

"Three years ago, the district launched a reading in the content area program aimed at having students in all disciplines engage in reading non-fiction material related to science, social studies, and math," said Thomas County Superintendent Dr. Dusty Kornegay. "Among many other things, grant funds will allow the district to purchase books and digital literacy content (e-books) to support this literacy initiative."

One of the most exciting features of the grant is that it will provide funding for the system to reach out to pre-school age children, birth to age 5, to introduce them to early literacy skills.

"Our understanding of how the brain works has greatly increased over the last two decades, and we have learned that the early years of a child's life form the foundation for later development," Kornegay said. "A strong foundation increases the probability of positive outcomes, and we want to make sure that every child in Thomas County has a strong foundation."

Associate Superintendent Melanie Chavaux led the team of teachers who wrote the grant proposal. "I am very proud of the team of teachers that worked collaboratively to create and develop a comprehensive literacy plan for the Thomas County School System. Through numerous meetings and consistently talking and listening to one another, the teachers were able to create a plan that will continue to improve literacy achievement for all students in the system."

The grant writing team represented all Thomas County schools and worked closely together in order to provide effective literacy instruction and support systems for all students.

"The focus of our work was not on 'maintaining status quo,' but on enhancing and enriching literacy in all content areas. It was also very important that our comprehensive literacy plan "expand" our current work instead of replacing it," Chavaux said.

"Teachers will have opportunities to receive professional learning from nationally recognized 'experts' in the field of literacy," Chavaux added.

Dr. Bob Dechman, Director of Federal Programs and Accountability for Thomas County Schools, noted, "The Striving Readers grant will give us an opportunity to provide engaging instruction that will motivate and encourage readers even before they enter school. We are excited to partner with the Thomas County Public Library and Thomas County Family Connections to offer resources and activities for children from birth to five years old, as well as provide additional instructional materials in schools throughout our system."

“We plan to work with the public library to offer early learning programs in the branch libraries throughout Thomas County,” Kornegay explained. “The support of the public library system will be critical in helping us reach young children in the communities where they live. We will be able to provide books and literacy resources to the children and conduct workshops for parents on how to use the materials to support the development of early learning skills.”

“What a unique opportunity for the library to join the county schools to enhance the learning of preschool children and their families,” said Nancy Tillinghast, Director of the Thomas County Public Library System. “Being prepared to enter school is the prize and with us working together we can encourage, teach and show families how to achieve this goal. We are thrilled to assist the schools in this endeavor,” Tillinghast said.

The school system will be able to contract with the public library to extend library hours at the branch facilities as needed to support the literacy initiative.

“We know that reading is the foundation for all learning. Students who do not develop this skill early are at a disadvantage in all academic disciplines,” Kornegay said.

“Reading is a skill that improves the quality of life. By providing a variety of resources, this grant will make possible the enrichment of a generation and unlock the potential of tomorrow's leaders,” Dechman said.

This grant program is for ALL readers, not just struggling readers. “The grant allows schools to enrich instruction for all students, rather than just a handful of students who are below grade level. We anticipate that we will be able to provide even more resources and experiences for our students. We will be able to implement our school literacy plans and support the individual needs of every learner,” Dechman explained.

Grant funding will be spread out over five years and will be used in each school for teacher professional learning; benchmark screeners to measure students’ reading ability and to monitor progress; and robust materials, curriculum, and technology to support literacy integration.

“Student literacy is a crucial issue and a key focus of my administration,” State School Superintendent Richard Woods said in announcing the Striving Reader grant award recipient.

“We are extremely excited about the grant award and the positive effects it will have on student growth and achievement,” Kornegay said.