



The Rochester Reading Champions Program Positively Impacting Literacy in Olmsted County

Did you know that, according to the National Institute for Literacy, 75 percent of unemployed adults have reading or writing difficulties? Even a small improvement in the literacy in this population would have a significant impact on the local economy, communities, and neighborhoods, which is why the Rochester Public Library (RPL) and The Reading Center collaborated with other invested partners on a new literacy program, Rochester Reading Champions.

It began in 2012, when the RPL underwent a strategic planning process that involved asking more than 30 community stakeholders—such as members of the business community, home-schooled students, parents, the public school superintendent, university chancellor, local nonprofits serving children, the workforce, the disability community, seniors, philanthropists, and others—what their vision of the community was and how the RPL fit into that vision. What evolved was a collective focus on the need to improve literacy.

In 2013, RPL began identifying where gaps existed in providing literacy assistance to youth and adults in the Rochester area. When they discovered The Reading Center, a nonprofit organization which helps identify learning issues among children and adults and provides specialized assistance, they discovered a critical partner in The Reading Center in achieving literacy improvement. Cindy Russell, Executive Director of The Reading Center, says, “We shared information with the library staff on how prevalent dyslexia is and how, while it is the most common reading disability, few people with dyslexia know they have it. We work very hard to educate people on how to identify whether they or their children have it.”

The Reading Center also trains volunteers or parents in the Orton-Gillingham approach, which it has used for more than 60 years to overcome the challenges associated with reading. The problem? While 17 percent of children have a reading disorder, The Reading Center was only serving 5-8 percent of those. The obstacle to serving more people comes down to the costs associated with tutoring, transportation, and timing.

Even though The Reading Center provides scholarships for its services, the scholarships don’t cover everything. Since many potential beneficiaries are at or below poverty level, they are not likely to seek assistance.

Partnering with RPL provided the opportunity for both organizations to reach more children and adults in need of tutoring. “This is a partnership on steroids,” says Audrey Betcher, RPL director. “Rochester Reading Champions would not succeed without the high level of commitment from each partner organization.” Additional partners include the Boys & Girls Club, the Olmsted County Adult Detention Center, and the Minnesota Adult and Teen Challenge. Staff at each site identifies people who need tutoring as well as potential tutors. The Boys and Girls Club sends letters to parents letting them know about the services available and invites them to contact staff if they believe their child could benefit from the program. At the Adult Detention Center, inmates are given a questionnaire that identifies if they are dyslexic and interested in getting help. Each partner organization has shared resources to make the recruitment and instruction of tutors a sustainable model.

“What is so different about this program is the level of community engagement,” Betcher says. “Nobody has enough resources to provide all of the tutors, but we have a lot of engaged, highly educated people in this community who really understand how critical literacy is for life-long success.” In the end, she adds, “This is really about partnership, focusing on what the community says is important, and figuring out how to do something about it. It says a lot about this community and what it values.”

None of it would have been possible without the help and support of the Rochester Area Foundation. “The Foundation was the first organization to believe in us and that credibility leveraged other contributions,” says Betcher. “The partnership was just as important as the money, and being able to go to other funders with the Foundation’s support was absolutely instrumental.”



Become a Reading Champion

Reading Champions, or tutors, are trained by The Reading Center through lecture and practicum throughout 120 hours. A two-year commitment to tutoring 45 - 60 minutes twice weekly, which does not include lesson planning, is required. Finding volunteers is the most important part of the continued success and expansion of the program. “This program has been a great way for organizations that care about community members and literacy in Olmsted County to make a real and lasting impact on helping people with difficult reading skills to permanently change those skills for the better,” says Cindy Russell, executive director of The Reading Center. For information on becoming a Champion, visit <http://www.rochesterpubliclibrary.org/champions/index.html> or call Gail Harris at (507) 328-2341.