

# BRIGHT SPOTS

Ready for School, Prepared to Learn



## National Center for Family Literacy, Louisville, KY

For many immigrant families, school isn't just a place where a different language is spoken. It's a place where children are separated from their families and immersed in a foreign culture. In Springdale, Ark., that's been true for the many immigrant families who have come to work in the poultry industry.

Enter the National Center for Family Literacy with an innovative program to help the children in these families get off to a good start in school by strengthening their parents' English literacy, too. "The Toyota Family Literacy Program (TFLP) changes the culture of our schools," says Mary Bridgforth, the English as a Second Language Coordinator in Springdale. "It's incredible to watch a mother change, in one year, from someone who's unable to speak up when she's accidentally overcharged at Walmart, to someone who is an active member of our PTA. The program has such positive effects on our whole community."

## Improving child and parent literacy simultaneously

Established through a partnership of Toyota and the National Center in 2003, the Toyota Family Literacy Program addresses the educational needs of Hispanic and other immigrant families by teaching English language and literacy skills to parents at the same time it enables them to be more involved in their children's education. Geared to families of children in kindergarten through third grade the program invites parents to come to school with their children and split their time between adult education classes and their own children's classrooms.

Hispanics are the largest and fastest-growing minority in the country, yet they are the only group whose literacy rates have actually declined in the last 15 years. Hispanics make up roughly one-fourth of the nation's kindergartners and one-fifth of all K-12 students. The high school dropout rate for Hispanics is four times higher than for non-Hispanic whites.

The program builds on family bonding, a value central to Hispanic culture, to dramatically improve the educational attainment and economic situation for multiple generations. Children are happy to have their parents join them at

### WHO THEY ARE

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#### Toyota Family Literacy Program:

- Operates in 50 communities across the United States (26 sites serve only ESL families).
- Has involved more than 1 million families.
- Has received \$37 million from Toyota since 1991.
- Offers 3-year, \$325,000 startup grants and ongoing training and networking.
- Leverages \$6 locally for every private dollar invested.
- Enables expansion of model programs through realignment of existing community resources.

#### Participant profile:

- 93% Free and Reduced-Price Meals.
- 80% of parents unemployed.
- 60% of parents have less than a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade education.

### CONTACT

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school, and are often more engaged and attentive when their parents are present. Parents, in turn, better their own lives and are more able to support their children's learning. The program has also increased the amount of reading participating families do at home. As parents become more comfortable using English in their personal lives, they read to their children more.

## The Springdale, AR example

Since 1995, the number of Hispanic students in the Springdale schools has grown from 500 to 8,500. Being with their children in the classroom has helped immigrant parents understand the school's expectations, what their children are experiencing, and how they can help them succeed. Each day, participating parents and care givers come to school with their children. With other Spanish-speaking parents, they participate in two-and-a-half to three hours of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and spend half an hour to an hour in their children's classes.

The Springdale schools are completing a start-up grant that funds three elementary schools and includes three years of technical assistance and training from the National Center. The district has been so impressed with the program's initial success that Title I and III funds have been allocated to add five more elementary schools and a middle school to the program. The only budget gap anticipated for next year is around free child care. Already, participating parents are volunteering to fill that need. "Springdale is a great example of how sometimes, all it takes is some seed money and getting out of the way," says Sharon Darling, president and founder of the National Center for Family Literacy. "They have turned the program into a system-wide approach to improving third-grade reading. It shows how we really can make the home-school connection and turn it into something with lasting impact."

## Triggering positive change

According to Darling, programs like the Toyota Family Literacy Program work best in places where there is consistent support and enthusiasm from teachers, superintendents and school boards and a willingness to collaborate and innovate. School boards need to ensure that such programs have adequate classroom space, planning time and other resources. Says Darling, "If there's not a vision at the very top level that this is possible and that it's something that's meaningful in the district, then it's much harder for it to take root."

Since 1989, the National Center for Family Literacy has helped more than one million families make educational and economic progress by pioneering — and continuously improving — family literacy programs. The Center's numerous programs and initiatives offer families support and enrichment at multiple points in their growth. Those programs range from the Family and Child Education (FACE) program, which serves American Indian families with children from birth to third-grade, to Wonderopolis, funded by Verizon to bring the wonders of learning to families and classrooms every day.

## WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

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**Children achieved significant academic, social and behavioral gains when compared to a comparison group, including:**

- **Higher K–3<sup>rd</sup>-grade reading levels.**
- **Greater statistically significant pre- to post-program increases.**
- **Greater gains in pre- to post-program ratings by their teachers.**
- **Higher scores on 9 academic, social and behavioral indicators.**
- **Significant changes in motivation to learn, support from family, self-confidence and involvement in class activities.**

**Adults achieved significant literacy gains:**

- **Over 60% improved literacy scores by at least one level.**
- **Improved ability to understand basic oral and written instructions in English, read a note from a teacher, set up a doctor's appointment, and display basic computer literacy skills such as word processing and email.**
- **Improvements equate to a 2–3-year gain in English and basic skills during the part-time, 9-month program.**