Grant awarded to improve kindergarten readiness, bolster reading scores

By Katy Nesbitt
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Getting kids kindergarten ready and reading proficiently by third grade is the focus of a $5,000 grant from the Oregon Community Foundation to Wallowa County.

Amy Johnson, executive director of Building Healthy Families, said the collaboration with her organization, Joseph School, Head Start and the Wallowa County Health Department began long before the grant was received last week.

"The grant just formalizes and solidifies our growing arrangement," said Johnson. "It's icing on the cake."

She said research has shown success in other areas of the state where "one-stop" service for families is offered. The program's goal is to prepare students for kindergarten and improve third grade reading scores.

The money will pay for training and networking opportunities, technical assistance and planning.

Building Healthy Families will administer the grant in coordination with the schools and the health department to provide wrap-around services for children prenatal through third grade and their families.

Johnson said each fall Joseph School's full-day kindergarten serves students entering at various stages of school readiness. Some attended Head Start, others private or nonprofit pre-schools, while some have no previous educational experience.

The program will implement strategies for children's development from birth to grade three where every student can make a seamless transition from pre-school to kindergarten, equipping them for success in school and life.

Johnson said it has been well documented that students who are not reading proficiently at the end of third grade are less likely to experience academic success, more likely to drop out of school, and have life-long struggles and high risk factors.

"Using an approach that not only addresses the needs of students and families, but engages an entire community to take action, will be the most effective way of instilling systemic change in our systems of early childhood and elementary education," said Johnson.

The collaboration was already in place with members of each organization serving on the Building Health Families board including President Annette Moeller, program manager of Head Start; Vice President Rhonda Shirley; Joseph School superintendent; and Laina Fisher, administrator of the Wallowa County Health Department.

Building Healthy Families offers a wide variety of community assistance from family support and early childhood development to alternative high school education. Their Early Childhood Campus is focused on the essential elements of positive early childhood development and includes a learning center serving children 6 months to 4 years old.

Such an environment demands the utmost safety and the center has hefty security, said Johnson.

From her desk, Johnson can see the front and back entrances of the campus. Children and their parents enter the learning center from a back door, which is locked and must be opened by a teacher.

"We make sure there are plenty of safety precautions before a child enters. We have 911 programmed into our phones, an emergency safety plan, and all exits have extra, heavy-duty doors," said Johnson.

Two blocks away is the police station, another feature ensuring safety for children and their parents. Head Start, as a federally secure facility, has the same security features.

"In light of recent incidences, we have strengthened our staff's readiness. (They) all have mental illness training," said Johnson.

She went on to say that mental health, drug and alcohol issues are concerns her staff addresses every day. The center is also home to safe, supervised parental visits.

Johnson said, "We take the opportunity to work with families under stress to keep our community safe."

Shirley said at Joseph School, safety is the number one priority as well.

"We're taking some steps including lock-down procedures in all classrooms with kids and teachers," said Shirley.

After the mass killings in a Connecticut grade school last month, Shirley has been addressing teacher and parent concerns.

She said teachers have assessed their rooms and identified the best places to take students if the school is forced into a lock down.

Outside doors will remain locked during school hours. All visitors must enter the front door except during athletic events, where they will be allowed to enter the side door near the gym, said Shirley.

She said continued safety measures will be discussed at a teacher work day in January.

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