

Project Serve on Literacy and the Needs of Children

March 4, 2014

Speakers were: Jeanne Knouse, SCASD, Director, **Learning Enrichment, ESL**, Student Services; Barbara Geist, Executive Director, **Park Forest Day Nursery Preschool**; and Tamra Fademi-Badi, Program Coordinator, **Global Connections** **Host: Brent Frank Recorder: Jane Childs**

Literacy is learned. Illiteracy is passed along by parents who cannot read or write or do not support their children's efforts to be prepared to learn at school. In the State College Area School District (SCASD) 16% of the 7,000 students are considered economically disadvantaged. (Based on a family of 4 whose income is \$44,000 or less.) Of these 1,120 economically disadvantaged students, 43 are homeless, either living in transition shelters, cars, or motels and hotels. All of the economically disadvantaged students are eligible for special education programs, school lunches, tutoring programs, ESL, and other enrichment programs. After school Tutoring Centers are seeking volunteers who are able to provide transportation for programs run by teachers in selected schools.

Partnering with elementary schools on home transportation is one of the ways Jeanne Knouse suggested we might be of some assistance, as well as working at volunteer tutors. Most of the tutors are Penn State students, but they are seeking older adults who have transportation. There are two endowed programs (Queeney and Sheridan) that provide funds for students who are recommended by faculty to receive stipends or financial assistant for enrichment and other programs.

Early childhood education at the Park Forest Day Nursery Preschool focuses on getting ready to read, with 1:1 reading by volunteers to the children. The preschool is free to economically disadvantaged families and supports not only the children, but their families with food, breakfasts and lunches, clothing, and other assistance, even emergency funds in crisis situations. Vision and dental screenings are also provided for the children. PFDNP is a United Way funded agency that receives the remainder of its funding from civic organizations and from local church congregations. The school is trying to leap the literacy gap in vocabulary development using any and all means of connecting children to books, reading, music, art, culture, and local events by immersing the children in all aspects of what literacy entails. This is in preparation for making the children learning-ready by the time they get to kindergarten. Barbara Geist explained that grades k-3 are focused on learning to read; and after grade 3, the focus is on reading to learn. Reading is critical to brain development. Preschool preparedness is critical to successful elementary school education. We didn't get a sense of the numbers of children being educated in the preschool so we don't know the demographic they are dealing with, except to say there were a number of Russian children who were in the program. (will send a note to Barbara to get these updated stats)

Tamra Fademi-Badi stepped in for Merrill David. Tamra explained the focus of Global Connections and their work with international students and their families. Global Connections is a United Way agency, located in 427 Boucke, on the Penn State Campus, but is not part of the University. Isolation of women is a big issue for international families, so Global Connections works hard to assist with language acquisition for non-English speakers, both mothers and children. The children of school age seem to do very well with the ESL programs in the SCASD, but mothers and young children need extra help with ESL through conversation partners, host family programs and book clubs. ESL was once an important program for G-C, but the school district has taken that program over, so ESL program are on an as needed basis.

The Refugee Resettlement Program (which Faith supported) has been discontinued after two years of operation. One family has remained in State College, but others have left for larger cities, closer to Harrisburg. The obstacles here are a lack of affordable housing and lack of jobs for those with limited English.

Most needed for Global Connections are mature adults who will act as host families/friendship program participants or conversation partners. There are over three thousand international students studying at Penn State. Many are here for several years on graduate programs with their wives, parents and children. Isolation and lack of cultural awareness are areas of focus. Global Connections provides programs for international children and their families, cultural dinners and lunches, and international speakers for area schools. Drivers for these speakers, who go to distant school districts, are also needed.

Questions from the participants related to what types of programs could the whole congregation, including families, participate in. What we heard mostly was about programs that require 1:1 adult contact or transportation issues. Or, the need for financial support for programs that already are in operation.