

NEWS

Grants to expand local literacy center programs

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Adults who have trouble reading have more options if they're to get help and should have even more next year.

Greater opportunity for help is important for the Baton Rouge region, where about one of every five people functions at the lowest level of literacy.

Four literacy centers — Adult Literacy Advocates, Literacy Works, St. Paul Adult Learning Center and the YWCA — have all added second locations this year, thanks to an \$180,000 federal allocation.

The umbrella group for local literacy efforts, the Greater Baton Literacy Coalition, recently won a separate \$300,000 federal grant to expand even more.

In particular, \$150,000 of that grant will head to literacy centers to set up pilot programs focusing on “workplace literacy.”

Debbie O'Connor, executive director of the literacy coalition, said that could mean bringing literacy training right into businesses, as opposed to requiring employees to go to outside centers.

Difficulty getting to a literacy center is one of the biggest obstacles to getting help, and regular sessions make a difference, she said.

“It seems like a no-brainer,” O'Connor said. “The more often they go to class, the faster they make progress.”

To access all the federal money, O'Connor's organization, however, is having to raise a local match of \$75,000. The coalition also has more general fundraising to do to help support the work of the literacy centers.

“The more support that the coalition gets that can flow through to providers means they can focus more on what they do best, instruction,” O'Connor said.

The coalition has declared this past week Literacy Week. Barnes & Noble is donating part of the proceeds from its book sales this week to shoppers who mention the coalition when they're making their purchase. The promotion continues through Monday.

On Friday morning, the coalition held its annual "community breakfast" to raise awareness of literacy. There, it showed two new public service announcements developed by students at Zachary High School, promoting the need for literacy. These spots will air from around Christmas through January on WBRZ.

O'Connor said the weeklong effort is a lot of work, but she hopes it will produce dividends.

"It gives us a chance to have a bigger impact than having small events throughout the year," she said.

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