

NEWS

Program gives parents chance for diploma

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ARTHUR D. LAUCK/The Advocate

Jennifer Johnson helps her son, Johnell, 8, write family names on a homemade placemat they made after the ribbon cutting for the Family Literacy Academy of Baton Rouge at Dalton Charter Elementary School. The YWCA Center for Family Empowerment program is being launched Tuesday. Johnson said she and son Johnell 'will basically be learning together. I want to advance in life and be able to buy a house one day.'

Johnell Johnson was an infant in 2002 when his mother, Jennifer Williams, had to abandon her quest for the high school equivalency diploma she had long seen as the path to a better life.

Eight years later, Johnell brought home a letter from Dalton Charter Elementary School that presented Williams, 25, with a second chance. And, she said, she's determined to make the most of it.

Williams and her son are among 15 families who have signed up so far for a family literacy academy the YWCA Center for Family Empowerment is launching Tuesday at Dalton Elementary, a charter school operated by Advance Baton Rouge.

The concept, said program director Deborah Jones, is to support families with educational tutoring and parental and literacy training that puts them on the road to economic self-sufficiency.

Jones said that what Williams learns through the program and the educational interactions she'll experience with her son are the core of the family literacy program.

"She will help him and help herself at the same time," Jones said. "The whole family and the whole community benefits from it."

Jones said the national Volunteer USA Foundation is providing technical and financial help. In addition, she said, the Dollar General Literacy Foundation is providing a \$5,000 scholarship for the outstanding adult student enrolled in the program to attend the college or technical school of his or her choice.

Williams, who attended a ceremonial ribbon-cutting for the program Thursday, said she dropped out of high school after her junior year.

She said was participating in a literacy program on Convention Street in 2002, but due to her circumstances — working two jobs and lacking transportation — wasn't able to complete studies needed to pass the General Educational Development Tests.

An individual must pass the GED Tests in order to receive a Louisiana high school equivalency diploma.

Williams said she can walk to Dalton Elementary, so transportation won't be an issue. She said she is excited about spending time with her son at the school while studying for the GED.

"We'll basically be learning together," she said. "I want to advance in life and be able to buy a house one day."

Williams said she hopes to enroll in a culinary arts program at Louisiana Technical College and study to become a chef. She said her dream is to work someday for Chef John Folse.

Celina Charles, 26, said she was already studying at home to prepare to retake the GED test when her son, Briclyn Vincent, 4, brought a paper home from the school about the YWCA family literacy program.

Charles said she had taken the GED previously, but wasn't able to pass the math and science portions.

A daughter, Calaya Charles, 6, also attends Dalton Elementary, and Celina Charles said she's looking forward to spending time with both children during part of the school day as she studies for her high school equivalency degree.

Charles, who dropped out of school in 10th grade, said she hopes to attend Delta College and study to become a licensed practical nurse.

“If I win the \$5,000 scholarship, that will help me a whole lot,” she said.

Jones said the literacy program is seeking donations to expand the program to other schools, and to renovate a house on the grounds of Dalton Elementary to house the program there. She said it will operate temporarily from the school’s gym.

Debbie O’Connor, executive director of the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition, said such programs need to be expanded.

“These are the kinds of programs we should be putting in place in our community because we know we have to effect generational change,” O’Connor said.

Howard Veeder, project coordinator for the YWCA Center for Family Empowerment, said the program at Dalton Elementary is designed to serve up to 25 families.

He said he’d like to see the participants attain the goals they set for themselves.

“When you work with parents who left school for one reason or another, they face a lot of barriers,” Veeder said. “They are more than capable of achieving the same educational levels as anyone else in our community. They are just taking a different route is all.”

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