

Turn Services participates in National ‘Club Connect’ reading initiative



A national reading initiative, sponsored by NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune, launched Tuesday to help provide elementary school children across the country with tools to develop early reading skills.

Club Connect, a partnership of United Way Worldwide, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and education publisher Scholastic, will focus on improving third graders' reading proficiency. Experts consider third grade essential to future academic success and to reducing high school dropout rates, speakers said during the launch event at Chalmette Elementary School.

Bill O'Dowd, creator of Club Connect and a board member of the Worldwide Leadership Council of United Way, said that at lower-income levels there is only one age-appropriate book at home for every 300 children, and that third graders who do not read at grade level are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

“Club Connect was designed to give these kids a chance,” O'Dowd said.

NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune is committing \$100,000 in donations over the program's first four years, along with an additional \$100,000 in in-kind services, said Publisher Ricky Mathews.

He noted that a recent study by the Washington Center for Equitable Growth said closing the educational gap could improve the economy by giving children more opportunities.

“Most importantly though, Club Connect teaches our kids the great joy of reading,” Mathews said.

Michael Williamson, the president and CEO of United Way of Southeast Louisiana, praised NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune’s multi-year commitment to the program.

“Their substantial financial support coupled with their market leadership as the premier media organization in the metro area will help spread the Club Connect message and provide the infrastructure support to kick the program into high gear,” Williamson said.



Chalmette Elementary is one of two St. Bernard schools that served as regional pilot schools for the program since the fall. The other local pilot school is Smith Elementary School in Violet. Funding now is available for 15 of the other 98 eligible Title 1 schools throughout southeast Louisiana, organizers said.

Nancy Shoemaker, United Way’s vice president of investor relations for the local region, said that it requires a \$10,000-per-year commitment over four years to support one school.

The money provides an elementary school with the books and digital access to help promote reading and parent engagement. A Club Connect website provides activities, and incentives, to motivate children to read after school and through the summer.

A “Reading Oasis” from Scholastic includes hundreds of books for Pre-K through third grades, a stereo listening center - many of the books also have audio components - and furniture.

At the ceremony Tuesday, Brian Gallagher, president and CEO of United Way Worldwide, commended St. Bernard schools on their recovery since Hurricane Katrina, calling their progress “phenomenal.”

“Obviously, all kids have the ability to learn. It’s just whether we give the kids the resources to do it,” Gallagher said of Club Connect.

St. Bernard Public Schools Superintendent Doris Voitier said “reading is critical to academic success” among young children, and if reading skills are not mastered in the early years, “children will fall further and further behind.”

At Chalmette Elementary’s launch event, Clifford the Big Red Dog joined children who were reading, putting his hands to his ears as he encouraged students, including Brandon Gibson, to read louder. Clifford nodded his large head, ears flapping, in approval.

Several children then moved to computers where they played reading games on the Club Connect website. Gibson played “Country Toad,” jumping his toad successfully from one country’s capital to another.

Club Connect’s goal is to bring the program to all 98 eligible schools in our region, and eventually to other parts of the nation.

David Fennelly, director of Associated Terminals and Turns Services, and Bob Merrick, chairman and CEO of Latter & Blum, each has pledged financial support for the program. Last year, Merrick pledged \$1 million to the United Way of Southeast Louisiana.

