

## EARLY READING FIRST

# Reading grant gives children an edge

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NEWS-SUN

Four Lea County school districts opened their doors to 4-year-olds in a push for literacy awareness.

Tatum, Jal, Eunice and Hobbs school districts received a \$1.63 million federal grant in September 2004 for Early Reading First. The full-day program is open to pre-school children to help build a solid literacy foundation.

The grant was a collaborative effort between the four districts and Regional Education Co-op No. 7, according to Eunice Superintendent Toni Trujillo.

These are the only four districts in the state providing the Early Reading First program, according to Trujillo.

All four districts use the same curriculum, Breaking Through to Literacy, and focus on the areas of oral development and pre-literacy activities.

Students are exposed to vocabulary through the use of 'big books,' which are oversized books that sit in an easel while the teacher reads or points out different items in the pictures. They also work on knowledge and application skills.

"Oral language development is key in Early Reading First," said Trujillo, whose elementary school has about 22 students in the program.

While some may argue that the program is nothing more than free baby-sitting, according to Jal Elementary principal Ron Verschueren, it is much more than a daycare facility.

"The children get a chance to talk to each other and work on their language skills," said Verschueren, whose district serves about 19 4-year-olds. "This program provides enrichment for those kids."

Jal and Tatum schools are unique in that they have been able to offer the program to every 4-year-old in those communities.

"It really pushed us to the limit," said Tatum Superintendent T.J. Parks, whose district has about 26 children in the ERF program. "The neatest part is that you have to pick and

choose and leave some out. Now we can accept every 4-year-old and all of those kids get to benefit."

The material is "age and developmentally appropriate," according to Trujillo.

The program has been up and running since January and, according to REC Early Reading First grant director Belinda Morris, another \$75,000 of federal dollars were given to the program.

"I know Hobbs will be adding an additional 4-year-old class next year," Morris said. "I feel that as the program grows we will be able to meet more needs in these communities."

Students are not just provided with language and literacy skills but, according to Hobbs assistant superintendent for instruction Debbie Cooper, students are also fed breakfast and lunch.

"It makes a difference in their learning when children aren't hungry," Cooper said.

Hobbs Municipal Schools has 23 students in the ERF program that is housed at Booker T. Washington Elementary School.

"I really believe that we are going to see a difference in tests scores," Trujillo said. "Because of the rigor and all of the quality aspects of this program, I think people will see the results."

Lovington Municipal School District is not a member of the REC. The district chose not to pursue the grant, Superintendent Jimmy Derrick told board members during a board meeting several months ago.



Left, Four-year-old Bryan Carrasco colors in his reading sheet Friday during the Early Reading First program at Eunice Elementary.

Below, Four-year old Cameron Fisher reads and answers questions at his independent work station during the Early Reading First program at Eunice Elementary.

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