

February 16, 2021

What is Beloit's Literacy for Life Initiative? Why does it matter?

The Beloit Literacy for Life Initiative had its humble start in the Fall of 2016 when community members and the Stateline Community Foundation were inspired to action following a presentation by Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a nationally recognized expert and proponent for the importance of early childhood literacy. Dr. Navsaria made a compelling case for why early childhood literacy is critically important for every child's need to be better prepared for success in personal, educational and career pursuits. Beloit schools were seeking to close a significant achievement gap and, were in the process of developing plans to improve the educational preparation for our children. Dr. Navsaria's message provided the insight and direction necessary for an all-out community effort to build an initiative seeking to advance efforts which promote early childhood literacy.

From its beginning, the Beloit Literacy for Life Initiative has had a significant impact on the Beloit community, and has worked to create an organization that will continue to champion the importance of early childhood literacy. For example:

1. The Initiative would be organic, built from the ground up. The goal was to create a community of Partners, consisting of many area non-profits, governmental agencies, church groups, concerned citizens and others who recognized the importance of early childhood literacy, but who were encouraged to implement an approach that best met their mission, interests, strengths, talents and needs. Materials, information, data and possible lesson plans developed by Rachele Elliott, Director of Early Childhood Literacy for the School District of Beloit, were shared at monthly meetings where partners could evaluate what might work best for their individual organization/agency.
2. BLFLI worked to create a nucleus of key organizations/Pillars whose visibility and presence signaled a critical relationship that embraced the importance of early childhood literacy for the greater Beloit community. These Pillars are: the School District of Beloit, the City of Beloit, Beloit Health System, Community Health System, Non-Profit and Faith Based organizations, Corporate and Business interests. Significant milestones for the Initiative thanks to our Pillars include: a City Proclamation in support of the BLFLI, a bookcase in City Hall, "little kids libraries" at the Fire stations and fire department personnel reading to kids, particularly at Culver's; the support of the 2 Health Systems with their adoption of the Reach Out and Read Program and; business support, most especially Culver's, who was a highly visible Partner/Pillar with activities at their restaurant.
3. The Beloit Community Foundation and the School District of Beloit would be a repository for the books which were made available to any and all partners who would distribute them to children and families at sponsored programs. As of this date, BLFLI has distributed over 8,000 books to kids and families. Book distribution has been a primary component of BLFLI's efforts to promote literacy in the community.
4. Because the organizational paradigm is organic and not structured in the same manner as many organizations, yet having a goal of remaining active in perpetuity, an organizational mechanism was needed to make plans, prepare for the future, keep the Initiative cohesive and coordinate marketing efforts to ensure our success and longevity. Thus, the "Rudder" group was organized to accomplish these tasks. During monthly meetings the Rudder group discusses issues,

concerns, strategies and possible options to ensure the BLFLI remains relevant and moving forward. There are no officers and decisions are made by consensus.

5. From its inception BLFLI is for **ALL** children and has no political affiliations or allegiance to any specific group locally or nationally. Constant efforts to recruit diverse representation to our monthly Partners and Pillars meetings is an ongoing priority for BLFLI which is also committed to developing strategies for reaching families and children in every neighborhood. A primary tenet of the BLFLI is to develop relationships with families built on trust, respect, honesty and a sensitivity to the fact that many families are struggling with significant difficult burdens due to COVID and other societal factors.
6. BLFLI has had the benefit of bringing leading experts to Beloit where they have been able to share their research and expertise which provides substantive and definitive evidence that the theory of early childhood literacy and brain development significantly increases a child's chances for success in life, and where it has been proven that investment in early childhood literacy efforts results in a return on investment of 7-13% each year. BLFLI is committed to transparent use of data and evidence to track progress. Key statistics to be used in evaluating progress include the 4K and 3rd grade reading scores, PALS evaluation of kindergarten readiness, survey information, family feedback, School District's data on student progress which measures student readiness for learning and reading.
7. Efforts to recognize extraordinary efforts to promote early childhood literacy have been made with an awards luncheon and program which had to be suspended due to COVID, but will resume as early as possible, perhaps during the Fall of 2021. A list of award recipients is attached. BLFLI shares monthly minutes and information to 183 followers and regularly posts information and photos on the group's webpage.
8. Current efforts are underway to market BLFLI's success and vision for early childhood literacy including billboards, articles and printed materials emphasizing the tag line: **Build a Brain, Build a Life, Build a Community.**