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New Foundation program develops reading skills in young children





PROGRAM PREPARES KIDS FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

free program being offered to Cenla residents is preparing young children for school success by cultivating a love for reading long before they set foot in a classroom. The Read to Soar early literacy program, recently developed under The Rapides Foundation's Education Initiative and administered by The Orchard Foundation, has been presented in three Rapides Parish locations and began in four other parishes in lune

Read to Soar is a free, eight-session reading workshop for children ages birth to 5 and their parents or caregivers. The workshops help develop and strengthen a culture of reading at home by educating parents, building a child's home library and increasing awareness about community resources to help ensure the child has the tools for school success. By the end of the program, children get a certificate of participation and 40 new books to adorn their home library while parents come away with tips and resources that help them teach their young ones.

"At The Rapides Foundation, our mission is to improve the health status of Central Louisiana, and our Education Initiative recognizes the correlation between the health of an individual and educational attainment," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation. "Research tells us that people with higher education levels are healthier and live longer,



so it's important for us to invest a portion of our funding in the area of education."

Read to Soar is a concerted effort to reach out to children before they enter kindergarten to ensure success throughout their entire school careers. It's part of the Education Initiative's School Readiness component. The early literacy program complements the other work being done in the area of School Readiness, providing professional development institutes for Cenla public school pre-K teachers, and Head Start and childcare providers who are participating in the state of Louisiana's effort to expand access to high-quality, publicly funded early childhood education programs.

"We know how important it is at the pre-K and



The further we can take them through school, the higher their educational attainment level is going to be, and therefore the healthier they should be.

Marjorie Taylor, Executive Director of The Orchard Foundation

kindergarten level that a child comes ready and prepared in order for them to be successful and move forward in school. So we had to think of the best way to get a child kindergarten ready, and in order to do that you have to focus on birth to 5," said Marjorie Taylor, Executive Director of The Orchard Foundation.

"Reading is the most critical indicator of school success, especially in those early grades. If we can get pre-K and kindergarten students coming in that have already developed strong reading habits — they may not know how to read but they'll be coming from homes that focus on reading — then the more successful that child will be," she said. "The further we can take them through school, the higher their educational attainment level is going to be, and therefore the healthier they should be."

Read to Soar is intentionally designed to focus on both the child and the parent or caregiver. "Parents and caregivers should develop structures in their home where they are focused on reading to the children so that the children create a desire to read. They should have books in the home to read, which is a benefit of this program. Read to Soar helps create that library of books within the home and also gives parents or caregivers some tools they can use to develop an early desire for reading," Taylor said.

Alexandria resident Marquand Coleman's



4-year-old son, Zephaniah, had little interest in reading when she saw a Read to Soar flier about an upcoming training session while studying at the Martin Luther King Junior Branch Library. Coleman, a single mom who attends LSUA and works shifts at the movie theater to make ends meet and pay for his daycare, brought Zephaniah to all eight sessions.

"He wants to read all of his books every day. Before we came to the program, he wasn't doing that. He didn't want me to read to him. But that changed after he came to the program. He wants me to read all of his books," she said. "I feel like he will be more than ready for school. He will be prepared."

Coleman said she makes sacrifices in order to give Zephaniah an education. It's a lesson she learned from her own parents. "It's important for my son to have an education because I want him to go farther than me in life. I want him to strive for more, and knowledge is everything."

She recommends the program for people who want a better life for their kids. "I highly recommend it. I know everybody has things they



have to do and they can't always do certain things, but when it comes to your children, you have to do it to better them," she said.

The eight Read to Soar sessions follow early childhood education best practices and are specifically tailored for Central Louisiana. The Orchard Foundation's Early Childhood Literacy Program Coordinator Rebekah Simpson, who runs the program, selects the activities and 40 books that go home with the participants. "I try to get a variety so the parents can find out what their kids like. That's part of the class, educating the parent."

The Read to Soar program was recently offered in two Alexandria locations, and it is now being held in Pineville. To expand the reach, The Orchard Foundation contracted with four early literacy specialists who will teach Read to Soar throughout Central Louisiana. This paved the way for four summer workshops that began in June in Grant, LaSalle, Vernon and Winn parishes. Additional workshops will be scheduled in the future. For more information, call The Orchard Foundation at 318-767-3029.

The workshops are for up to 15 families at a

time. Parents can bring multiple children, although only one set of books goes home with each family. Families get books after each session. By the end of the eight sessions, participants will receive a grand total of 40 books and a book bag.

Each workshop focuses on a different topic area. Topics include brain development/ social and emotional connection; proper bookhandling skills; meaningful conversations, building vocabulary; phonological awareness, which is the ability to hear and manipulate sound structure within words; print awareness, which consists of identifying letters, concepts of print and understanding how print conveys meaning; foundations of reading; and emergent writing.

"We are constantly getting positive feedback,"

We are constantly getting positive feedback.
A lot of the kids are loving it and the parents and caregivers are loving it too.

Rebekah Simpson, Early Childhood Literacy Program Coordinator

Simpson said. "A lot of the kids are loving it and the parents and caregivers are loving it too."

The workshops are designed to be fun, giving participants a chance to bond with their kids in a learning environment. "It's a literacy program. The idea is we're building their home library and we're teaching them how to read to their kids and learn how their kids learn. That's the whole idea behind this, but there's also this bonding factor that we want the adults and children to have together," she said. "We get in our daily schedule so much that we forget to take the time to get to know each other and have some fun time together, but it can be educational."



Cenla residents have more opportunities to make healthy choices

The Rapides Foundation in 2014 began offering a grant opportunity designed to help communities develop, implement and enhance projects that focus on healthy eating, active living or prevention of tobacco use, substance or alcohol abuse. Since then, the Foundation has awarded 11 multi-year Healthy Behaviors Program Grants that have the ultimate goal of giving residents more opportunities to make healthy choices.

Grant funds are being used for a wide variety of regional projects, including improved parks and outdoor fitness equipment, mobile playgrounds and farmers markets, healthy food distribution programs, community gardens, and alcohol and substance abuse prevention programs. Grants were funded up to \$300,000 for a three-year period.

Many of the grants are helping communities build upon existing projects to improve health. Several Central Louisiana towns are using funds to make improvements at existing farmers markets, for example, which is increasing visits to markets and ultimately giving people better access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

The grants are part of the Foundation's Healthy Behaviors Initiative, which addresses prevention of tobacco use, poor diet, lack of physical activity, and alcohol and substance abuse prevention. The initiative recognizes that poor diet, physical inactivity and the use of tobacco are health behaviors directly linked to premature death and disability from heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and certain types of cancer. Illicit drug use and alcohol consumption are also associated with injury, death and disability.

"Changing health behaviors is essential to improving the health of a community, and we know that this work takes a long time, sometimes generations," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation. "This is one reason why our Healthy Behaviors Initiative consists of a multi-level, integrated, comprehensive approach that has projects in schools, workplaces and entire communities."

LASALLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT HEALTHY BEHAVIORS PROGRAM GRANTS

The Healthy Behaviors Program Grant to the LaSalle Economic Development District funds the Healthy Places LaSalle Project — a parish-wide effort to reduce obesity by shifting the cultural norm toward healthier lifestyle choices, including healthier eating, better life choices and safer active living opportunities.

Grant funds have been used to improve existing parks and farmers markets, put healthier food items in school canteens and ballparks, educate kids about healthy living and persuade local governments to approve ordinances that make all outdoor public places in LaSalle Parish smoke-free.

"We do not have Parks and Recreation departments in our towns. We're just not big enough to do that. So it's funders like The Rapides Foundation that allow us to provide a lot of these additional resources for our residents," said Cynthia Cockerham, Executive Director of Community Development for the LaSalle Economic Development District.

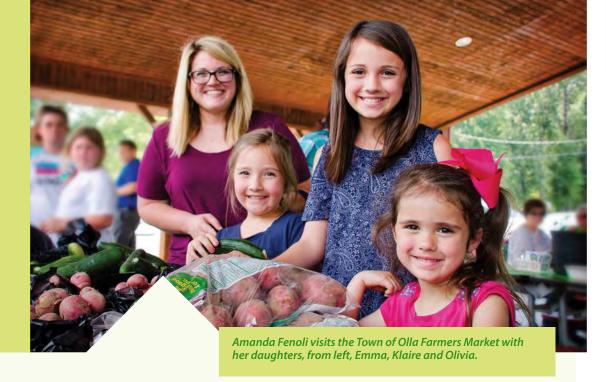
"A lot of the work started with installation of additional infrastructure at our public parks," Cockerham said. This included installing playground equipment and park lighting so that families can use the parks in a safe, friendly environment. In addition, grant money was used to add benches, shade structures and picnic tables near farmers markets and walking and bicycle trails.

"It's important to us that we continue to expand public parks. We want to promote them as a local gathering place. The projects we've been able to do in those parks really gives people a place to go and gather, and at the same time enjoy outdoor spaces and nature and have opportunities for recreation, whether you are a 3-year-old on playground equipment or walking the trails as a grandmother with that child. Those



HEALTHY PEOPLE

LASALLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT



are some of the things we work toward."

In Jena, grant funds were used to purchase outdoor fitness equipment in the town park's walking loop. "So community residents can not only get in our parks to walk for exercise, they can also do some weight-bearing exercises on a regular basis during park hours," Cockerham said. "We are trying to make not only infrastructural and environmental changes, but we want to see the culture of our community change as we become more walkable. We want to see gradual change and have healthier people."

In the area of healthy eating, Healthy Places LaSalle leads the Healthy Concessions Project, which persuades schools and ballparks to offer healthier and more nutrient-dense concession items. As a result, kids have the option of purchasing items like string cheese, frozen yogurt sticks, fresh fruit and water. Grant money is being used to help schools pay for the sometimes higher-priced healthy items, and to purchase additional cooler space to store some of the items, Cockerham said.

Healthy Behaviors Program Grant money also funded the 2017 Summer Day Camp in the Park, a free, eight-session day camp held at six different parks. The 154 children who attended learned about healthy eating, physical activity, smoke-free living and drug-free education, all in an outdoor setting. Certified teachers led the activities, which included yoga, a cumulative marathon and food art.

"That was one of the greatest things as far as educational outreach that we ever could have dreamed about doing," Cockerham said. "We wanted those kids to be outside with no technology, and we pulled that off. It was highly successful."

In the area of tobacco-free living, Healthy Places LaSalle in 2017 successfully persuaded municipalities and the Police Jury to designate all public parks and outdoor spaces as smoke-free spaces. Grant money was then used to create signage to let the public know they can enjoy outdoor smoke-free areas.

Cockerham said LEDD leads the Healthy Places LaSalle effort because of the correlation between a healthy community and economic development. "LaSalle Economic Development District made a decision about eight years ago that in order to foster economic development to a higher level, that there was work needed in community development. They are very aware of the links between good public schools, healthy people, healthy communities, healthy worksites, healthy employers and how all of that comes together to create a product that makes potential investors look at us as a place to locate. We're trying to prepare our community to be better positioned when investors look our way, and of course we also want our people to be healthy because all of that ties together to have a better prepared workforce."

CITY OF NATCHITOCHES HEALTHY BEHAVIORS PROGRAM GRANTS

Healthy Behaviors Program Grant funding has enabled the City of Natchitoches to expand its existing farmers market, bring healthy food and activities directly to people through a mobile farmers market and portable playground, and create the Mayor's Health and Fitness Council to work on long-term solutions for the health of Natchitoches residents. Staff members were hired to coordinate these efforts, and the city is able to spread the word through its Ready, Set, Go website, all funded through the grant.

Dallas Russell, Community Programs and Outreach Coordinator for the City of Natchitoches, credits the grant with boosting projects and programs that support the city's efforts to improve the health and wellness of its residents.

"This grant was really critical to creating more awareness of health and wellness and providing opportunities for us," she said. "It is an important element that allows the mayor to move forward in setting the tone for a healthy city." The Natchitoches Portable Park is a mobile recreation unit that makes regular stops at two local parks and visits in other parts of the city on special occasions. Similarly, the Natchitoches Mobile Market is a mobile unit filled with fresh produce that also makes stops in the city, oftentimes alongside the portable park.

The Portable Park is filled with various types of games and activities intended to get children and adults active and engaged. When the unit pulls up to Pierson & Mallet and Ben Johnson parks, it's not uncommon to see local kids rush in to play basketball, volleyball, archery, board games and other activities led by city staff, Russell said. "At first they had a lot of traditional games, but we started buying more unique items and games. The children are drawn to those things they had never encountered before. They are really intrigued and enjoy those unique items."

The Natchitoches Mobile Market is filled with fresh produce from the Detention Center



HEALTHY PEOPLE

CITY OF NATCHITOCHES

Community Garden and local farmers. By bringing the market to communities, young people are able to taste and sample fresh fruits and vegetables, sometimes for the first time.

"They have their little bag of veggies. Some of them would bite into it and try it," Russell said. "I can definitely say they try things they had never tried before and saw things they had never seen. That I know."

The Natchitoches Farmers Market has grown now that the city has a full-time staff person hired under the grant. The market hosts vendors and offers programming with different themes and activities. The Saturday market has a Kids Club incentive program, funded by the Healthy Behaviors Program grant, that provides children ages 2-13 with \$5 tokens they can use to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables each time they visit the market.





The grant also funds a coordinator for the Mayor's Health and Fitness Council, a 13-member group that meets quarterly to oversee the city's healthy behaviors efforts. "We as a city want to act as the facilitator, as the glue, but it's driven by those individuals and how they want to move forward. The goal is to meet the grant expectations," Russell said.

Russell explained the grant has become a community effort. "For me, what was unexpected and pretty great was the amount of interest from the community from different organizations and people who wanted to be a part of it. The library started coming out with their bookmobile at our mobile market and portable park, and Cane River Children's Services started sending someone out too with games for the kids and to read to the kids. So it's created opportunities and partnerships."

Ready, Set, Go staff member Trinity Butcher works with children who visit the Natchitoches Portable Park.

Photo at top, Aaliyah Davis shops for fresh produce at the Natchitoches Mobile Market.

CENTRAL LOUISIANA AIDS SUPPORT SERVICES

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS PROGRAM GRANTS



Central Louisiana AIDS Support Services (CLASS) is using its Healthy Behaviors Program Grant funding to design and implement "balance," a program for residents struggling with alcohol or substance abuse, people in recovery and anyone interested in learning a new way to live a more purposeful life. The program consists of free group-discussion sessions based on the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model, which uses acceptance and mindfulness strategies, together with commitment and behavior change strategies, to help participants define their values and goals.

"The balance program is being offered as an alternative to or as a supplement to other community-based cognitive behavior therapy, abstinence only, or 12-step programs," said CLASS Executive Director Ann Lowrey. "ACT, the model on which the program is based, has shown a lot of promise as a method to help people overcome their substance abuse problems, and does it in a way that can also improve every aspect of life."

The 90-minute sessions are currently held in multiple locations on days and at times that work best for participants. CLASS is training volunteers to become facilitators for the program, with plans to eventually offer 12 sessions every week at different times and locations to reach as many people as possible.

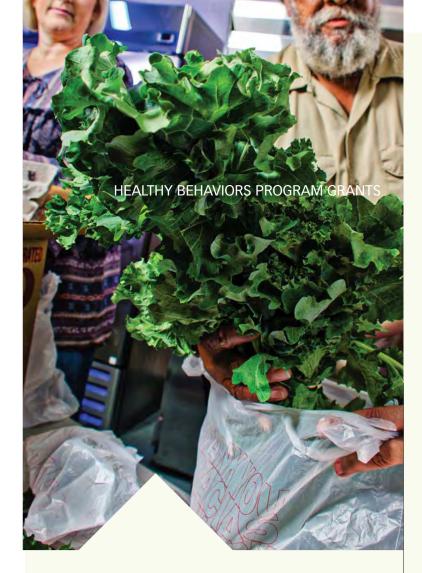
"We are working with professional facilitators who have experience in substance and alcohol abuse prevention to lead the groups and train members of the community in how to facilitate the groups in the future. It's our hope that this will help make the program sustainable beyond the grant period," she said. "The idea is to bring this program into the community and tailor the groups to the problem that people are having in their community."

Residents can drop in on any session at any location and can continue the program as long as they like. Sessions are confidential. People interested in volunteering to be a facilitator are required to participate in the program and then co-facilitate sessions before leading the group alone.

"Everybody who has participated in the program has had positive things to say about it. They have really enjoyed it. They like the positive approach, they like the meditation that's involved, the mindfulness practice, and the way that we tie the mindfulness practice in to the topic for the session," Lowrey said. The ACT model has been used all over the world and is beginning to gain momentum in the United States. "There's a whole lot of evidence-based information that this really is an effective strategy to help overcome substance and alcohol abuse," she said.

FOOD BANK OF CENTRAL LOUISIANA HEALTHY BEHAVIORS PROGRAM GRANTS





Twice a month, between 75 and 100 families at three Central Louisiana schools pull up to the school after hours to receive fruits and vegetables, meat, fish and healthy non-perishable items through the Food Bank of Central Louisiana's School Pantry Program, funded by a three-year Healthy Behaviors Program Grant awarded in 2015.

The Food Bank started the program at Bunkie Elementary Learning Academy in September 2016, and at Natchitoches Junior High and Vernon Middle School in the spring of 2017. The program is expected to expand to at least two more Central Louisiana schools in Fall 2018.

Distributions are based on income, need and family size. Each family receives a minimum of \$5 of fresh produce funded under the grant, and each individual in the family receives about 10 pounds of healthy food each distribution.

Because the goal of the grant is to increase

people's access to healthy foods, Linda Hutson, the Food Bank's Director of Development & Community Relations, goes through the Food Bank inventory routinely to ensure all the food for this program meets healthy requirements. Distributions differ each week, but some of the items handed out include cold smoothie drinks, frozen fish, melons and grains.

"The people who come in are so appreciative. The families are excited to see what they get," Hutson said. "We're seeing some of the children excited to see some of the produce they are getting, which is sometimes surprising, but it's a great thing."

The Food Bank purchases the produce from the Pointe Coupee Minority Farmers Group, which often harvests either the day before or morning of a school distribution. "It's straight from the ground and it goes straight to these families," Hutson said.

The Food Bank selected schools based on need and whether they are in a location that lacks hunger relief programs. Families must meet federal poverty guidelines, but they can apply any time during the school year. "If they are using another food pantry in their communities, we ask them to pick one or the other," Hutson said. Since transportation can be an issue, the Food Bank allows people to send an authorized representative to pick up the food items. Distributions are from 3:30-4:30 p.m., after school, to protect the privacy of the families.

In addition to healthy food, families receive healthy recipes to better help them prepare some of the donated items. Healthy Behaviors Program Grant money also pays for equipment schools use to store the food items.

"We have some grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, and so when you see some of their incomes I don't think they would be able to provide some of this food for the children they are raising if it wasn't for this program," Hutson said.



CLTCC Grant Funding to Boost Manufacturing Training Programs in Cenla



\$4 million investment to strengthen manufacturing training programs at Central Louisiana Technical Community College is the result of careful, deliberate planning that started in 2008 when The Rapides Foundation began a community discussion around the future workforce of Central Louisiana.

Community meetings and a comprehensive report that followed were centered on the theme "Beyond High School: What Will it Take to Build Cenla's Next Workforce?" and got local leaders to

take a deeper look at postsecondary education and its connection with local business. The report emphasized the need for a community college in Central Louisiana and showed the tremendous gap between available jobs and proper training for those positions.

"We knew that a majority of the future jobs would require more than a high school education but less than a bachelor's degree. And so in recognizing that, the Beyond High School report demonstrated we had insufficient training capacity options within the region. It was a very



We needed to fuel employers' growth and income growth by providing professional technical training.

Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation

logical, research-based study that in conclusion said we needed a community college and we needed to fuel employers' growth and income growth by providing professional technical training," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation.

In December 2017, The Rapides Foundation announced it awarded a \$2 million matching grant to the Louisiana Community and Technical College System that will be used by CLTCC to establish the Central Louisiana Manufacturing Technology Center in downtown Alexandria and to build and expand its manufacturing programs located on campuses throughout the region. The State of Louisiana matched the Foundation's funding with \$2 million.

The three-year grant is part of the Foundation's Economic Development Initiative, which supports its mission of improving the health status of Central Louisiana by making the link between healthy economies and healthy people. Healthy economies with low unemployment rates and higher wage jobs provide people with the means to purchase medical insurance, make better healthcare choices and live healthier lifestyles. For that reason, the initiative aims to raise the standard of living in Central Louisiana by improving the region's capacity to produce higher wage jobs for all income levels.

The Workforce Skills and Development component of the Economic Development Initiative supports efforts to build a cohesive and effective workforce development system in the region that meets the demands of employers, quickly responds to change, and provides training opportunities and career pathways for employment and advancement for all Cenla residents.

In recent years, the Foundation funded over \$2 million in Workforce Opportunity and



Healthcare Occupations grants that were used to support Central Louisiana postsecondary institutions in providing training programs for healthcare and technical occupations.

The recent grant to CLTCC "is our second part of that, which is to work on the manufacturing side of the economy," Rosier said.

The grant dollars will be used to fund a state-of-the-art technical training program with a focus on advanced manufacturing. The goal is to produce graduates for the high-wage, high-demand jobs in the manufacturing sector throughout the region. "Our grant is a vote of confidence but also a challenge to CLTCC leadership and staff," Rosier said.

CLTCC Chancellor Jimmy Sawtelle said the funding will "enhance the quality of our programs and college. The goal of this investment is to support Cenla's students, local business and industry, and the community. This well-crafted

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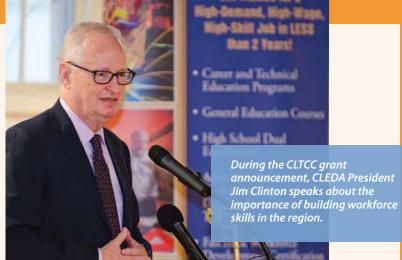
CLTCC MANUFACTURING GRANT

strategy will positively impact our workforce, economy, and the entire region for years to come."

Rosier said the Foundation's Board of Trustees "expects to see significant advancements in program offerings focused on advanced manufacturing, and welding and fabrication, as well as CLTCC's ability to deliver some of that coursework remotely to help students who have a lack of transportation."

CLTCC plans to rename its current
Manufacturing Training Center the Central
Louisiana Manufacturing Technology Center,
which will eventually be relocated to downtown
Alexandria as part of the new Alexandria Main
Campus.

Over the next three years, the college will strengthen the manufacturing core curriculum, create pathways to generate a larger pipeline of students, increase work-based learning opportunities, expand specialized processes for programs such as welding, develop an outreach plan to drive enrollment, and deliver graduates for the high-wage, high-demand, high-skill jobs in the manufacturing sector throughout the Central Louisiana region, Sawtelle said.



Jim Clinton, president of the Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance, one of the partners for the manufacturing grant project, credited the Beyond High School discussions with beginning the transformation in the way the community thinks about the region.

"We recognized that we had a tremendous manufacturing opportunity and that manufacturing jobs had a splendid multiplier effect -- that every time we had a manufacturing job, we had other jobs as well. And we recognized that we were going to transform the economy of Central Louisiana," he said. "These circles keep coming around to the same reality. We have to invest in the knowledge and skills of our people."





The Rapides Foundation continues a legacy of community healthcare initiated in 1903.

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