

JOHN BREAU
LOUISIANA

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WASHINGTON OFFICE:
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TDD (202) 224-1986

senator@breau.senate.gov
http://www.senate.gov/~breau

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1803

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Mr. Steve Ricchetti
Deputy Chief of Staff
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
West Wing, Ground Floor
Washington, D.C.

Dear Steve:

I would really appreciate your personal attention to and assistance with putting together a meeting for the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to discuss its exemplary family literacy program, "Prime Time-Family Reading Time." Enclosed is information about the initiative, which has my full support and enthusiastic commendation. I'm proud to say the program was pioneered in Louisiana in 1991. As I understand, "Prime Time" has been cited in the President's Committee of the Arts and Humanities report, "Coming Up Taller: Arts and Humanities Programs for Children and Youth at Risk."

If the LEH could meet with the appropriate domestic policy officials at the White House and, if possible, some from Mrs. Clinton's staff, I know they would be as impressed as I am. "Prime Time" is a unique, efficacious approach to teaching reading and imparting literacy within the context of the entire family, especially for families whose children are at risk. One of its strong features is the comforting and nurturing environment in which parents and their children bond as they participate.

"Prime Time" is expanding to other states and deserves consideration for nationwide implementation. Its entire focus is to help parents and their children, together as a family, to become literate. Please look at the prospectus personally and also share it with others at the White House. I would appreciate your thoughts and theirs very much and am hopeful a meeting could be arranged for the LEH to discuss the "Prime Time" program with the appropriate officials. Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Sincerely,



JOHN BREAU
United States Senator

JB/jeb
Enclosures

this is info. on the
Primetime Reading
Program for the
meeting Friday
10:30
-Hema

PRIME TIME

FAMILY READING TIME



Michael Sartisky, Ph.D.
Executive Director / President

Kathryn Mettelka, Ph.D.
Deputy Director

Rhonda J. Miller
Associate Director

225 Baronne Street
Suite 1414
New Orleans, LA 70112
(504) 523-4352
(800) 909-7990 toll-free in LA
leh@leh.org

Dianne Brady
Project Director

107 Bountiful Way
Oak Ridge, LA 71264
(318) 728-0026
BountifulW@aol.com

Prime Time-Family Reading Time An Approach to the Issue of Inter-Generational Literacy

Prime Time-Family Reading Time - an inter-generational family literacy program - is a unique six- or eight-week program of reading, discussion and storytelling held in public libraries, community centers and other public venues. The program features award-winning children's books which introduce participants to fairy tales and folk tales from around the world, stories about problems children encounter, and tales from history told for children. Prime Time is targeted to assist parents whose literacy skills are low build confidence in helping their children, ages 6 to 10, learn to read.

"Prime Time emphasizes the importance of families reading together, as well as the significance of humanities content," Michael Sartisky, LEH president and executive director explains. "Our goals are to use humanities content to reinforce the role of the family, encourage parents and children to bond around the act of reading and learning together, and help parents and children learn how to select books and become active library users."

Begun in 1991 with a pilot at the East Baton Rouge Parish Library, Prime Time programs have now been completed in 52 of Louisiana's 64 parishes. Prime Time has recently expanded to new states with program completed last year in Canton and Hattiesburg, Mississippi and Arlington, Texas. Also, new programs are slated for Arkansas, Georgia, Montana and Connecticut in 1999. Sartisky noted. "It feels good to know that we represent Louisiana with an educational program that's effective, that other states want."

In each 90-minute session, a storyteller demonstrates effective reading techniques and a humanities scholar serves as a discussion leader, introducing families to methods of talking about texts during the eight-week program. Each subsequent session features three stories focused on a single theme, such as beauty, greed, promises and commitment, cleverness and deceit, fairness and responsibility, courage, and hope.

Each session also includes a five-minute library commercial -- an opportunity for the librarians to show families other resources at the library. These resources often include other books by Prime Time authors, encyclopedias for help with homework, GED materials for the parents, books on parenting and health care, as well as newspapers, magazines, and other items families unfamiliar with libraries might not know about.

Prime Time texts are selected in consultation with scholars and experts in children's literature to ensure that the humanities content of the works is accessible both to children and to new adult readers, and also that the content is substantive. Prime Time has been specifically designed to model good read-aloud skills, to provide an opportunity both for participants to practice reading aloud to their children and for their children to read aloud, and to teach discussion techniques that stimulate interest and knowledge of the books' content -- all skills fostering a lifelong love of learning through reading.

Prime Time staff are currently developing a sustainable evaluation system which will ensure that measurement outcomes are in place to track the success of the program. The first step was to convene various constituents in focus groups during Fall 1998 to gather appropriate indicators and to identify influencing factors. Results of these meetings are available for review upon request.

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EDITOR'S COLUMN



Prime Time—Family Reading Time

To a literate person, the actual life situation of an illiterate parent is almost incomprehensible, however profound our sympathy or sincere our commitment to the idea of a literate citizenry. Those adept at reading and writing—especially if their parents and their parents before them were similarly literate—take reading and writing as much for granted as fish do water, birds do the very air, or the sighted take their vision. We read with and to our children in the company of books, secure in the naturalness of the bond we have between us, and comfortable in our ability to encourage and enlighten our children if they falter.

But imagine your quandary and your helplessness were your children to be studying Russian or Chinese and they came to ask your assistance with their homework. Imagine the opaqueness of the Cyrillic alphabet or the impenetrability of the ideograms and your absolute inability to order any of those symbols into coherent words, let alone phrases or sentences, which will assist your children's comprehension. Add to that your chagrin if you knew you were *expected* to have this knowledge. Yet this is a fair analogy for the situation confronting thousands upon thousands of our fellow citizens in the evening following every school day.

In Louisiana alone, nearly 1.6 million of our citizens—more than one of three—are estimated to be functionally illiterate. And while the child of literate parents almost never becomes illiterate, except in the rare instances of a true learning disability, there is an overwhelming likelihood that the child of illiterate parents will inherit their inability to read or write.

Families are the Solution

Here in Louisiana, we are fortunate in having a family literacy program that considers families—not schools, not government—as the true solution to the problem. **Prime Time—Family Reading Time** is the model family literacy program developed by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities which has now been conducted in 40 of the state's 64 parishes, mostly thanks to support from the State of Louisiana and the National Endowment for the Humanities. In addition, **Prime Time** is being piloted at eight sites in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas, and teams are about to be trained from the states of Montana, Georgia, and Connecticut. Pending is a grant request to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which in partnership with the American Library Association will further place **Prime Time** in ten more states throughout the country. For once, Louisiana may lay claim to being the source of a solution to illiteracy, not just being one of its most unfortunate and prominent examples.

Prime Time focusses on bonding families around the act of reading and discovering the public library as a resource to be enjoyed and thoroughly exploited. The primary target audience is low-income and low-literacy families with at-risk children. Our field experience has shown that parents are willing to do for their children what they had been unwilling to do for themselves. After graduating from the program, most families make the transition from not even owning a library card to borrowing on average a book a week per person. As Bertney Langley, one of our storytellers from Elton put it, "It is remarkable to see parents and children who clearly do not feel comfortable in the library setting initially, come 'out of their shells' enough to join in discussions about such topics as magic, fairness, greed, and death." The reading list for **Prime Time** is carefully culled from our research into children's literature which is exemplary in literary skill and which addresses important humanities themes and topics. This content is also what makes **Prime Time** that most rare of creations: both a literacy *and* a humanities program.

Only the Beginning

Mind you, those in dire need of literacy services are not always at the head of line to receive them. A library in Texas which approached its social services agencies to recruit its enrolled families on public assistance was rebuffed with the explanation that no one would be interested in participating in a literacy program until the little league season was over some six months later! While this appalls, it should not surprise, not in a country where virtually every daily paper has an extensive section on sports, and students spend more time practicing or watching sports than they are required to devote to study.

For all its initial success, **Prime Time** is still in its infancy. To move beyond being a pilot project and be truly effective in reaching the people who need it in significant and appropriate numbers, we need to be able to reach at least 10,000 people a year as compared to the 2,000 we do at present. Further investment in such cutting-edge programs will pay rich dividends for all our communities in the future.

—Michael Sartisky, Editor in Chief



Editor-in-Chief
Michael Sartisky, Ph.D.

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 1998

FAMILY LEARNING



Discussion leader Earle Bryant, associate professor of English at UNO, asks young program participants for their comments on the day's stories.

PHOTOS BY JOSEPH T. McCONNELL III

Family reading program a real success story

By ELIZABETH DONZE
Contributing writer

Last spring, when Sandra Moore heard about a family reading program at the Broad Branch Public Library, she thought it would be just another outing to occupy her children on a Saturday morning.

The eight-week program offered Moore and her sons, Christopher, 10, and Terrence, 11, the opportunity to read and discuss with other families stories focusing on themes such as greed, courage, fairness and cleverness.

"It turned out to be much more than I expected," said Moore, a parent aide and crossing guard at Andrew H. Wilson School, which her sons attend. "I found out how much I enjoyed it. It was nice to be read to for a change after reading to the boys for so long. It's nice to have it turned around."

Families citywide will have another opportunity to immerse themselves in great stories when the free Prime Time-Family Reading Time program returns to the Broad Branch, 4300 S. Broad St., for eight consecutive Saturdays beginning Oct. 3.

Developed through a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and first tried out in some of the state's libraries in 1991, the program operates on the premise that group reading

"Not only did we get the parents, we had uncles and aunts and grandparents in here discussing books with the children."

GERADINE HARRIS
Broad Branch Library
manager

and examination of literature can be springboards to a family's lifelong love of books and appreciation for the public library.

"It teaches families, especially those that may be at risk or who may not have had the experience of being read to as children, the sheer joy of reading," said Broad Branch Manager Geraldine Harris, who saw 14 families through the program last spring.

"Not only did we get the parents, we had uncles and aunts and grandparents in here discussing books with the children. If the parent couldn't come on a given Saturday, they traded off with another adult relative. They made sure that those children came," Harris said.

Targeted at parents and children 6 through 12, Prime Time applies an approach that is part book club, part storytelling hour and part English course . . . without the exams.



Luzviminda Baker holds her 4-year-old son, Luther Baker Jr., at the reading session.

At each session, parents are assigned three or four stories from children's literature and folklore to read aloud at home with their children.

At the next session, the assigned stories are re-read for the participating families by local storyteller and dramatist Chakula cha Jua. The group then spends 40 or so minutes dissecting the stories with the help of Earle Bryant, a University of New Orleans associ-

ate professor of English.

During last spring's program, "the families had to compare and contrast the stories, interpret themes and examine things like the action of the protagonist. They had, in effect, a moralistic discussion about the books," Harris said.

For example, during a session examining fairness, the group probed "The True Story

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Reading

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of the Three Little Pigs," a retelling of the popular tale from the wolf's point of view. Also underscoring the fairness theme was the story of "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," which revealed that adults do not hold a monopoly on stress. Children feel it, too.

"We had read a few of the stories already. But the way they presented it — with Chakula's enthusiasm and getting to talk about it with Dr. Earle — it was like hearing it for the first time," Moore said.

Harris thinks the program also succeeds because of what it is not.

While many ethical and cultural topics are examined during the literary discussions, the group is never allowed to turn into a rap session. Moreover, she said, Prime Time is not a class on the importance of reading.

"Prime Time is not about preaching to parents about what they should do. We never tell them things like, 'You'd better cut that television off at home,'" Harris said. "They come to realize the joy of family reading time by doing just that: reading together as a group."

The theme of the upcoming Prime Time-Family Reading Time series will be "Stories From Long Ago." The readings, pulled from world mythology and folklore and arranged around themes such as beauty, commitment and hope, will include classics such as "Echo and Narcissus," "St. George and the Dragon" and "The Frog Prince."

The program also acts as a natural plug for the library, with Harris and her staff of Prime Time volunteers registering participants for library cards and

highlighting the Broad Branch's other offerings, such as weekly storytelling sessions, a Learning Center offering GED exam preparation for adults and a newly enhanced computer center.

"Many of our families in the spring program stayed 30 minutes or more after the (end-of-session) refreshments," Harris said. "We showed them the computers and how to access the Internet. A lot of people didn't know that they could check out videos from the library, or that their children came here after school to do research on the computer."

"The most rewarding thing was the amount of interaction that happened. Families were reading together, talking about books together, eating together. You really couldn't tell one family from another. It crossed racial lines; it crossed economic lines," Harris said.

Scheduled to take place in a dozen towns and cities in Louisiana this fall, and already making waves in Texas, Arkansas and Mississippi, Prime Time-Family Reading Time has become a model in the campaign against illiteracy.

Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Director Michael Sartisky said the program, which the endowment recently copyrighted for national franchising, marks the beginning of a solution for Louisiana's estimated 1.6 million functionally illiterate residents.

"We see the family — not schools, not special programs — as the most effective unit for spreading literacy," Sartisky said. "Almost never are the children of literate parents illiterate."

The Broad Branch is the only area library to offer Prime Time this fall. Registration is limited to 25 families.

For information, call 596-2676.