

Agency: Raising Readers

Liaison: Kirk Youngberg

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Need for Program:

“The mission of Raising Readers in Story County is to improve language and literacy development in children from birth to age 8, and to nurture healthy parent-child relationships.” This mission statement says it all. To boil down the importance of early reading in the development of language and literacy skills in young people into a paragraph is impossible, but this program has helped thousands of families through multiple efforts outlined below.

Program Strengths:

This organization addresses a need that is entirely inclusive of all families with children regardless of income, color, etc. It is the only identified organization in Story County whose sole focus is literacy and the development of reading skills. This is a benefit not only for families with young children, but the community as a whole. A large portion of the families that are benefited by this program are identified as low-income, and the services provided by RR are a great benefit to all who use them, but particularly those without the resources to do much of this themselves. Through many different programs (outlined below), they work toward providing not only increased literacy skills in young children, but they also are effective at actually putting books into people’s hands, quite literally, thanks to the Welcome Baby program and more than a dozen other programs.

FY 2016-2017, 408 volunteers put in nearly 6,000 hours of service. New developments this year include the RRSC toolkit being downloaded by people throughout the county and interest in how to recreate these successful programs elsewhere.

There are over two thousand community members receiving the RRSC e-newsletter, including organization from Ft. Dodge, Mason City, Iowa Falls, and Marshalltown.

New Little Free Libraries continue to pop up around the community, with the latest one being built and installed in Maxwell recently.

RRSC, as part of Ames Reads, was again a finalist for the All-America City Award, and was named a 2016 Pacesetter community again in school readiness, out of school learning, and overall grade level reading. This is the 4th year in a row this recognition has been achieved.

RRSC maintains 19 programs that have been developed and expanded through remarkable volunteer efforts.

Every board member has responsibility for some facet of the educational or administrative functions of the agency.

Program Weaknesses:

Last year, the RRSC struggled with determining a helpful and detailed method in which to determine the unduplicated number of children and families that they serve since many of their programs are open to anyone at any time. The hiring of a data specialist this year has made a huge impact in figuring out how to tackle this data.

There is still a need for more volunteers or part time staff to coordinate programming, and support for programming is also still a weakness. It is a manpower heavy program that requires many individuals to fill the needs of coordinating and providing the services of the organization.

The ISU Extension partnership has been very beneficial. Due to lack of funding and personnel, RRSC was not able to reach as far into the community as it wanted. This partnership continues still to be designed for ISU extension staff to use a “tool kit” to offer literacy materials to those children who they connect with through Extension programming. This tool kit is now available on the RRSC website for download as well as the online catalog for extension staff. Communities previously out of reach are already utilizing it to create their own StoryPals programs.

RRSC board is still looking for more diversity on its BOD.

Financial Outlook:

Raising readers of Story County utilizes multiple sources of funding. Asset funds make up a little more than 1/3 of all funding, and provide necessary resources to continue, maintain, and expand program needs.

Internal Management Practices:

Kim Hanna has completed her second full year as Executive Director. Her focus is still advocacy, building partnerships, admin, marketing, and outreach for the growing programs. Judy Dahlke continues on at 20 hours per week as the Family Literacy coordinator specializing in parent education and outreach with Tot Time and Raising a Reader programs, school readiness programs, Super K-Transition to Kindergarten, ACPC reading buddies, and out of school learning with StoryTime at Eastwood. Lisa Reeves' hours are now ¾ time which allows her to deliver summer literacy program K-3 reading buddies, preschool dialogic reading program StoryPals in three communities, the Harrison Barnes Reading Academy which has recently expanded to Nevada. A 4th staff person was hired in mid-2017 as well. Autumn Long is the Story County Reads data specialist, and works closely with RRSC and story County Reads team members. Her position was created through a 3-year grant.

Agency Comments:

The RRSC staff and board love what they do. They are wholly invested in the programs they offer and in the growth and expansion of services they provide. They are most appreciative of the opportunity and assistance they receive from ASSET in achieving their goals.

General Conclusions:

These people are very dedicated to what they do and are a strong team. Their mission is as admirable as it is necessary to the betterment of individuals as well as communities. The groups served by their programs are often underserved in other areas, and the RRSC programs provide not only a benefit to establishing lifelong literacy and reading habits, but also a community of people with whom they can identify with and grow with.