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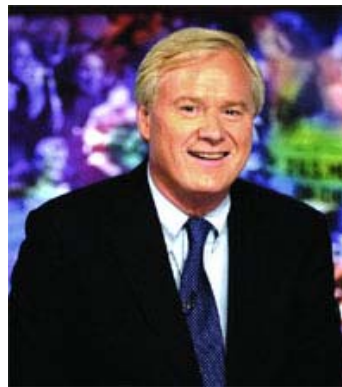
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Feature Stories

Getting a Good Read

Summit Will Shine a Spotlight on the Importance of Literacy

By **KATHLEEN MITCHELL**



Chris Matthews, host of MSNBC's Hardball, will speak about the importance of literacy at the Oct. 4 event.

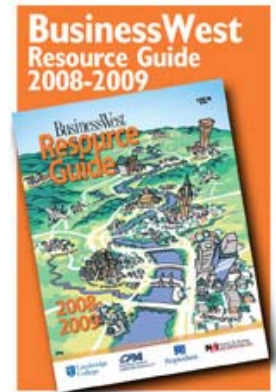
Gianna Allentuck calls it "the snowball effect."

She's referring to research that shows that, when communities implement successful literacy programs, businesses, families, and society reap real benefits that boost the economy.

Allentuck is an adjustment counselor at Elias Brookings School in Springfield and the person who gave birth to the upcoming literacy-based event, "United in Hope: A Community Comes Together."

On Oct. 4 at 2 p.m., national media personality Chris Matthews will convene a free, inspirational program about literacy programs in the area. It will be staged at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield in collaboration with WWLP-22 News, and will include an address by Matthews as well as compelling stories.

"We hope to encourage people in the audience to volunteer and become involved in the literacy effort as they hear stories of success," Allentuck said. "More volunteers means more services can be offered. And if more students graduate from high school, more will go to college or into the work force, which will make Springfield stronger



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economically. Then, businesses from other parts of the state or other states will pay attention to this city."

The afternoon will begin with a talk by Matthews about the importance of education in maintaining America's standing in the world.

The author, international journalist, and political commentator is host of the MSNBC show Hardball with Chris Matthews as well as a weekly syndicated news program.

Allentuck worked as a nanny for his children years ago and invited him to lead the conference. "His job is to educate people and make them think about issues and pay attention to them," she said.

There will also be presentations about five successful Springfield-based literacy programs. The event will be conducted in a town-hall-meeting style to allow people to interact with presenters.

Maura Geary, project manager for the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County's LiteracyWorks initiative, says literacy and education is a continuum.

"It's a fundamental part of the health and vitality of our community," she said. "The business community consistently tells us they depend on a literate and skilled workforce. It can influence whether a business locates or remains in an area. We know literacy begins at birth and continues through school years and into adulthood."

The first presentation will focus on the importance of exposing children to reading and books at a young age. It will be given by Bonnie McCain from the Early Childhood Center of Greater Springfield. "She is a really excellent teacher who has done a lot of training in the community," said Geary. "She has also had a lot of success in helping children learn to read and helping parents implement strategies at home to improve the literacy of young children."

The second presentation, by representatives from the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative, will focus on the importance of summer programs.

Research from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation shows that children in low-income families start school with a pronounced literacy gap. Although they may catch up during the school year, the gap remains and increases every summer. "There is a two-month gap when they enter kindergarten, which increases to a two-year gap by fifth grade," said Geary.

Hasbro runs a very effective program to reduce this gap that involves 3,500 children in 40 programs in Greater Springfield. It operates via a theme-based approach that includes options ranging from hip hop and drumming to theater and a hands-on Connecticut River Watershed program.

"Hasbro's program was developed by local experts and is aligned with the Massachusetts School Curriculum Framework," said Geary.

BusinessWest's Difference Makers class of 2009 raised money to purchase 350 books for a component of the Hasbro program in which teachers work with children identified as struggling readers. Also, the magazine has committed to making literacy an ongoing focus for future classes of Difference Makers.

The third success story comes from the Big Y Youth Employment Mentoring Program. It's a partnership with Springfield Public Schools to reduce the high school dropout rate, which stands at 60% in Springfield and Holyoke.

Although this statistic, combined with the poverty rate, educational gaps, and budget cuts can paint a negative picture, Geary said the program will make people aware of the "incredible things going on in our community."

Leslie Lawrence is a shining example of the difference an individual can make. The Springfield Schools volunteer has successfully recruited hundreds of volunteers and mentors. She and her mentee will talk share their experiences and what it takes to make a difference in the life of a young person.

"Research shows that in order to be successful in school and in life, children need a significant or meaningful relationship with an adult. But there are many children who don't have that," said Geary.

The afternoon program will also include a focus on adult-literacy programs. Geary said 17% of adults over the age of 25 in Hampden County don't have a high-school diploma, and 22% of the population age 5 and older speak a language other than English at home.

"We know that adults need to have access to language and literacy programs to become productive citizens, better workers, and good members of the community," said Geary. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, more than 1,200 adults are desperately waiting for spots to open in literacy programs in Springfield, Holyoke, and Chicopee.

Angelica Bay, who came to the U.S. from Russia in 1992, will share the story of how literacy programs helped her soar to success. The 19-year-old couldn't speak a word of English when she arrived here, but thanks to local programs, she earned a bachelor's degree from UMass Amherst, is working towards a master's degree, and is personally responsible for helping 16 people learn English and find employment.

Event organizers include Literacy-Works, the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation's READ! Reading Success by Fourth Grade program, Springfield Public Schools, and WWLP-22 News.