



The Republican.

More seats needed at family literacy table

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By **MARIE P. GRADY**

On a blistering summer day, Aida Garcia could have been keeping cool in the comforts of home. Instead, she was sitting in a tiny chair built for a toddler at the Boland Elementary School in Springfield.

Why? She was there, she said, for her granddaughter. And, as it turns out, she was also there for herself.

Garcia is among about 40 people enrolled in a family literacy program funded by the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts at the school. Adults learn the English language while their children and grandchildren learn skills designed to boost their literacy levels and academic achievement during the school year.

Despite studies linking the literacy and language levels of parents with academic success for their children, programs like these are few and far between these days in the Pioneer Valley.

In 2007, federal funding for such programs was obliterated in Western Massachusetts after federal Even Start funding was slashed in Washington and limited dollars in Massachusetts went to programs in the eastern part of the state.

A translator helps decipher a visitor's questions for Garcia on this day, but the native of Caguas, Puerto Rico, doesn't wait for the decoding when asked if she likes her teachers.

"Oh, Yes," she says, as a smile lights up her face.

Garcia had studied in a GED program at Chestnut Accelerated Middle School before joining this family literacy program run by Olga Martinez and the Springfield School Volunteers. She hopes one day to know the language well enough to get a better job and become independent enough to do things like go to a doctor's appointment alone.

The Boland program is among several funded in the Pioneer Valley by the Community Foundation's 5 & Under Initiative, which earmarks funding to help disadvantaged children 5 years of age and under.

Other programs based on the family literacy model - which includes parental education, child care and family literacy activities - are funded by the foundation in communities ranging from Ware to Northampton and Springfield.

The foundation funding is filling an enormous void in Western Massachusetts. Holyoke last year lost more than \$200,000 in federal funds and had to shutter its Even Start family literacy program, leaving just one state-funded pilot project serving a dozen families.

In Springfield, another foundation-funded program at the YMCA has helped at least six young parents obtain their GEDs while their children are educated and cared for in an early education program. The program for parents also includes physical fitness time and training in everything from getting a job to nutrition and mental health counseling, according to director Sarah Desmarteau.

Success in such programs is hard won. Many parents in such programs enter at literacy levels well below

high school comprehension, with one program reporting that more than 40 percent of entrants were at a level equivalent to grades 1 through 4. Still, the return on investment is enormous.

It costs an average of about \$2,000 to help an adult obtain a GED. But that investment can yield \$320,000 more in lifetime income for each person obtaining the GED and \$301,000 in net fiscal contributions to government coffers, according to studies cited by the National Commission on Adult Literacy.

According to the National Center for Family Literacy, children of undereducated parents perform at the lowest levels in school and often have higher absenteeism rates, often ending up in worse financial straits.

Desmarteau, director of the program at the YMCA, knows what young parents are going through. Once a teen parent herself, she worked her way to a college degree from Westfield State College before helping others.

Kaytlin Anderson is hoping to follow the same course. A ninth-grade dropout, Anderson is now well on her way to achieving her dream of getting a college degree in the medical field after taking the GED course at the YMCA. When she does achieve that dream, she won't be the only one celebrating.

Like so many parents in these programs, she has a larger reason to succeed: Her infant daughter Gabriella.

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Christina Stebbins, a pre-school teacher, shows parents how to read to their children at Edward P. Boland Elementary School in Springfield, Mass., by reading "Head to Toe" by Eric Carle. The July 18 lesson was part of a summer program which gives parents lessons in the English language while their children receive early childhood education.

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