



## **The Penn Literacy Network's Good Eating-Good Reading Program for Sheltered Families A Preliminary Report: August 21, 2016**

### **The Need for the Program**

"Philadelphia has the highest rate of deep poverty among America's 10 biggest cities, an examination of federal data by The Inquirer shows."

Source: U.S. Census 2014 American Community Survey, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Alfred Lubrano, October 1, 2015

Poverty and homelessness are two of the major challenges impacting education today. Both harm healthy development and academic achievement in children. Eric Jensen, in his book, "Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It" states: "Poor nutrition is a consistent factor that results from poverty and negatively impacts children's ability to learn and their long-term health outcomes." He also states that "two key factors are needed to help children and adults move out of poverty: education and establishing consistent and positive relationships with others."

The Penn Literacy Network (PLN) is a 36-year comprehensive professional development program based in The Graduate School of Education at The University of Pennsylvania. In partnership with a private philanthropist, PLN has designed Good Eating-Good Reading. It is a comprehensive, literacy-nutrition program whose goal is to positively impact nutrition and literacy outcomes for children and their families who live or formerly lived in homeless shelters.

### **Program Specifics**

PLN has completed the first cycle of a projected long-term initiative. The program focuses on reading, writing and talking through engaging literacy resources and family learning experiences, nutrition support, and part-time job opportunities for specific sheltered or formerly sheltered parents. Participating families committed to a minimum of three read-aloud experiences with their children per week, using the books, customized lessons and resources the program provided.

Specifically, the program focuses on family reading and writing time, healthy eating, and the importance of family mealtime, and parent-child and sibling-sibling talk. The program's goal is to create positive learning opportunities for parents and their children as they establish family-owned libraries with customized lessons that encourage conversations and language play with engaging books focused on nutrition. Parents participated in five interactive workshops that included books focused on nutrition for their permanent home libraries and writing and drawing resources in a carry along library container. In addition, the program included three hands-on nutrition classes, three coaching sessions and aligned childcare learning experiences (for children ages 3-11) focused on reading, writing, art and play while parents worked with PLN's literacy and nutrition facilitators.

Healthy meals and snacks were provided at each workshop. Some of the parents have been selected to be paid community literacy coaches at their own shelter or with families in other shelters. They will be paid to participate in coaching workshops and will receive ongoing support from PLN.

The PLN facilitators and coaches are all experienced educators who have gone through PLN's rigorous and ongoing professional development faculty program on the University of Pennsylvania's campus and in on-site programs locally, regionally and nationally.

### **Feedback from Participants**

"I joined the program to get to know more about my children. I am learning a lot."

"I look forward to bonding more with my children while reading and growing and cooking our own vegetables. "

"I enjoy reading to my children and have learned how to interact with stories in more than one way."

"My son reads to his little sister. He is 12. He normally doesn't like reading, but now he enjoys it since he's doing it with her. He won't do it (read to himself) if I ask him to."

### **Outcomes**

Mothers identified increased parent-child and sibling-to-sibling bonding. Consequently, mothers stated they got to know more about their children and learned engaging, structured, and fun activities that they and their children enjoyed together. A few mothers said they started looking at books and reading in new ways. One mom mentioned that this program allowed her to "hear herself read aloud" for the first time in her life. Another mom noted that her daughter's teacher reported that her child's overall reading level increased during the program.

### **Future Implications**

PLN hopes to continue this important initiative as we look for funding sources. The primary focus of this work will be to develop more family cohorts at this shelter and other shelters throughout the city and to provide the ongoing support of paid parent/community literacy coaches. Our hope is to help break the negative impact of poverty on sheltered and formerly sheltered families by continuing to provide engaging literacy workshops related to nutrition and other themes such as art and resilience, using good books and other resources as well as job opportunities for parents. It is our hope that we can replicate this initiative in other cities across the nation.

### **An Update**

A parent reunion workshop took place approximately 6 weeks after the original program ended. At the conclusion of the workshop, we met with 3 moms who will be employed part time as family literacy coaches in future shelter programs. Our discussion was warm and comfortable. Our new coaches shared how they were providing rich and engaging reading experiences for their children and giving them a deeper understanding about healthier eating for their families. One of the new coaches offered these poignant words, "You saw something in me that I've never seen in myself."

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