

Raising a Reader program goes Aspen to Parachute

CRES an early success story

By Nicolette Toussaint
Sopris Sun Contributor

Thanks to Raising a Reader, more than 300 Carbondale kids are learning to love books. They're among 2,100 local children who tote home red Raising A Reader book bags during the school year, then sport blue library book bags during the summer.

Formally known as "Raising a Reader Aspen to Parachute," the nonprofit aims to help children prepare for the learning-to-read process. In Colorado, about one-third of kids arrive in kindergarten unprepared and already behind the learning curve.

Raising a Reader Executive Director Rick Blauvelt, who lives in Carbondale, explained, "There's a large body of research that connects language development during the first five years of life with reading success later in life. In those early years, human beings are wired for rapid language development. That includes vocabulary, understanding of sentence structure, reading recall, focus and cadence — all things that are critical to a child's ability to learn to read. We know that children who are stimulated by word games, singing and ... oral language experiences do better in school, and studies have shown that children who come from low-verbal households can enter

school two years behind in their language development."

Up until third grade, kids spend much of their school time learning to read, and after third grade, they spend their time reading to learn. Blauvelt notes that there's a lot of research that confirms that "if children aren't reading at grade level by the end of third grade, most will never catch up."

The reason is that 90 percent of a person's brain development occurs during the critical first five years of life, a time when the brain is more receptive than it will ever be. "After that," Blauvelt noted, "it becomes harder to make up for lost time. Brain growth slows down. What scientists call the 'plasticity' of the mind is diminished by nine or 10 years old. If you haven't caught up [with your peers] by then, it's a lot harder to do later on."

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Concerned about children who were coming into kindergarten unprepared, Carbondale's Crystal River Elementary School contacted Raising a Reader (RAR) three years ago. The result was a collaboration: Raising a Reader and school teachers work with parents on four different nights. The Valley Settlement Project places a mentor to assist all year long in each classroom, and the school makes home visits to the highest-risk kids. A parent mentor assists in each classroom, and the school makes home visits to the highest-risk kids.

Raising a Reader supplies its trademarked red cloth bags — bags that are filled each week with four loaned, grade-appropriate books — to kindergarteners who would be entering first grade the next year.

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"The results were pretty dramatic," Blauvelt told The Sopris Sun. By the end of the school year, there was a significantly larger increase in reading readiness scores compared to the previous year. Drawing on the success of the Crystal River Elementary program, which was funded by the Cradle to Career initiative of the Aspen Community Foundation, RAR expanded it to 25 kindergarten classrooms up and down the valley.

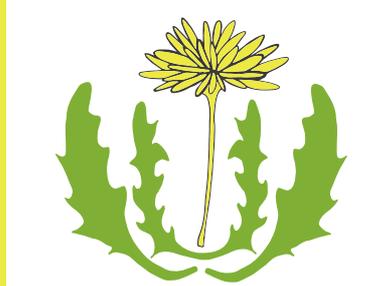
Engaging parents

Raising a Reader not only works directly with children, it also engages parents, teach-

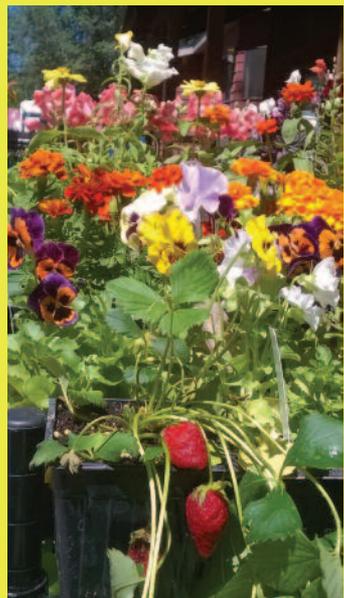
ing them the importance of reading aloud, songs, games and lots of conversation at home. Blauvelt explained that the organization reaches out to families through preschools, child care centers and Head Start, and also partners with other organizations to "identify kids who are not in any formal day care and who would be at risk of arriving at school behind their peers." Raising a Reader then invites families to join weekly neighborhood family outreach sessions in seven locations, including Carbondale.

During the past school year, Raising a Reader sponsored about 70 introductory school field trips to libraries for groups of 12-15 kids, plus assorted parents. "By the end of the year," Blauvelt said, "we will have collected hundreds of library applications from those field trips." During an end-of-the-year school event, "each child is called up, one at a time, and they will get a blue bag, a library book bag. It's not like the red school bag, which is used for a weekly loaner system and has to be left at school. The blue bag they get to keep forever, and there's a library card attached to its handle."

Recently, when the Ride the Rockies bike race passed through Carbondale, the Denver Post Foundation presented a \$5,000 check to Raising a Reader. The race is sponsored by the Denver Post — an organization that has an enlightened self-interest in literacy — and the Post's foundation awards grants to nonprofits in each of the six towns where racers spend the night.



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