

Program to give each child younger than 5 a free book each month

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— A program started in Tennessee by a country music star is getting ready to take root here, meaning that every child will be eligible to receive a free hardback book each month via mail until he or she is 5 years old. The program — Dolly Parton's Imagination Library — started in 1996. Since then, it has worked with other communities wanting to do the same thing by picking the books, buying them in bulk and shipping them to each child's home.

However, communities have to find a way to fund it, which is where the Horseshoe Foundation of Floyd County and Community Alliance to Promote Education, or CAPE, come in. The foundation donated \$75,000 to be spread over the first two years of this program. CAPE is matching \$31,600 of that, according to Becky King, director of the CAPE grant initiative.

The Floyd County program will officially kick off in August, at a date yet to be set.

King said Floyd County is taking the program a step further than other areas. Instead of just getting a book, parents will receive newsletters explaining how to help their child enjoy and learn from the book, and the books will be used in workshops CAPE already does in Title 1 and Head Start schools.

"I think this program really combines some really good practice we know is out there," King said. "First of all, it puts books in the home ... and because of what we're going to be doing in addition to the book distribution, I think it becomes a very powerful program."

Jerry Finn, executive director of the foundation, said Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was picked because it promotes literacy and that it works.

"There is data that shows that kids do well because of this," Finn said. "It's a proven program that does benefit children. Second, it's putting a great book in the hands of a child every month. ... We can't wait until a child walks into the doors of a school to begin shaping their education. The earlier we can begin shaping their education, the better off they will be when they do go into school."

Once the program is started, every child younger than 5 can sign up to get the books. The books will continue until that child's 5th birthday. According to the latest Census in 2000, that would total 4,603 qualified children in Floyd County.

Imagination Library's Web site says it will likely take about five years until there is 100 percent participation, which would cost in excess of \$90,000 a year. It predicts that the county will only see 20 percent participation by the end of the first year. However, Finn said he hopes it grows quicker than that.

King said she believes that as the excitement and enrollment builds on this program, more community donors will step up.

"I think this is something everyone will want to be involved in," she said.

She added that these books will come personally addressed to each child during a very crucial time in his or her development. She said she feels that will help get them ahead in school.

Finn said he's looking forward to comparing test scores years down the road to ones previously to see how much this program has helped children get ahead.

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