

# Promises to educate: Neighborhood program helps get books into kids' hands

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JaNae Francis

OGDEN -- Misty Carver and her 6-year-old daughter, Kiara, wasted no time to delve into a new book

Kiara got last week at Monroe Park.

They got the free book from a First Book national United Way community distribution in the park and walked straight over to where summer lunch was being served and started reading while they were eating.

"It's a great way to get her to eat her food," said Kiara's mother. "I'd read her a page, and then she would eat."

Carver said her daughter has a full bookshelf at home to pick from each day and that the family is very aware that reading now is important to Kiara's future.

But officials behind Ogden United Promise Neighborhood say the Carvers are the exception, and officials are working to pool community resources where possible to improve education in the heart of Ogden, where the biggest need exists.

"We are looking at dramatic changes in three years," said Leslie Herold, executive director of collective impact at United Way of Northern Utah. "We are working to take failing schools and make them into top-performing schools."

In December, the group received a \$500,000 federal grant to study ways to improve education in Ogden through a well-rounded community approach in a 5-mile area from as wide in some places as 9th Street to 44th Street and Harrison Boulevard to 1900 West.

If the study is successful, Ogden could receive as much as \$7 million a year for five years to implement efforts to bring education in Ogden to its pinnacle.

"This is a grant fit for Ogden," said former Mayor Matthew Godfrey, who now is CEO of Better City and just one of a host of volunteers in the effort.

"The vision is to have a world-class education and to have our kids achieve. ... Ogden School District has a goal to be in the top 10 percent of all school districts in the state. ... Promise Neighborhoods helps coalesce resources and efforts to help make that timeline."

Educational promises being closely studied and the ways they are being addressed are:

- \* Children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

"Children have no untreated health conditions or avoidable developmental delays at time of school entry," stated Tim Jackson, project director of Promise Neighborhood, in an email to the Standard-Examiner.

"Children are ready for school learning (socially, cognitively, emotionally) at the time of school entry."

- \* Students improve academic performance and are proficient in core subjects.

"Children demonstrate achievement of grade-level proficiency in major subjects, especially in English language arts and math," Jackson wrote.

- \* Students successfully transition from elementary to junior to high school.

"Children overcome the challenges that come with the school transition, including chronic absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more of school days) and the issues that lead to it," Jackson wrote.

- \* Youths graduate from high school.

"Youths graduate from high school and pursue additional education and job skills," Jackson wrote.

\* High school graduates obtain postsecondary degree or trade certification.

"Youths enroll in a two-year or four-year college or university after high school, and go on to graduate or obtain vocational certification completion and earn industry-recognized certificates or credentials," Jackson wrote.

Ogden United Promise Neighborhood grew out of a previous initiative that has been around in Ogden for a handful of years called Ogden United Community Schools.

Godfrey is behind a parent university that will officially be unveiled in the fall to help parents get behind their children.

It's one of a series of initiatives feeding into Ogden United Promise Neighborhood.

Finding ways to help kindergartners enter school ready to learn is a major initiative in Ogden.

U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, speaking at the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Legislative Summit in Washington, D.C., said high-quality early education offers the highest rate of return with some studies projecting a return of \$7 for every \$1 spent.

Also, he said the shortage of Hispanic students on graduation day in college has its roots at the beginning of the education pipeline.

He said one of the best, most strategic ways to continue and build on the educational progress is to expand access to affordable, high-quality preschool while also boosting college completion rates.

Officials at Ogden United Promise Neighborhood would like to follow the example of Granite School District, which has designed a successful pre-kindergarten program.

"These are kids that start out not speaking English," Herold said. "By the fourth grade, they are at the top of the class and on par with kids on the east bench that have every opportunity."

But officials and volunteers face limited resources.

They'll have to show that Ogden is dedicating existing resources in new ways to win additional funds, and they're doing this at a time when other federal funds are drying up.

Jill Oberndorfer, a program manager for a community services block grant at Ogden-Weber Community Action Partnership, said the federal budget sequestration cuts have caused a 6.2 percent reduction this year in the grant she administers.

"Our Head Start program is cutting numbers of kids next year," she said. "We were basically directed not to cut quality but to cut children. It will be sad to see that we won't be able to serve as many children as we did."

Because of these limitations, Oberndorfer said working together with other agencies will become ever more important.

"Anymore, it's not about providing services as a stand-alone agency, it's about partnering," she said.

If successful in making improvements as they carry out the \$500,000 study, Ogden United Promise Neighborhood will be able to fund some new preschools as well as a roster of other programs with up to \$35 million they would receive from federal funds.

One new preschool coming to Ogden will be hosted by the Treehouse Children's Museum.

"We are thrilled with the preschool," said Ogden School District spokeswoman Donna Corby of the Treehouse effort. "Preschools are one of the things we are missing the most. ... The majority of kids in that area have not attended school before kindergarten."

The school likely will serve about 30 students, half of whom will be required to come from families that live within the Promise Neighborhood, which also encompasses the area around the museum.

"Our goal is to not contain it to a classroom," museum director Lynne Goodwin said. "We will use all the exhibits at the museum as a teaching backdrop. ... This is an unusual resource for a preschool to have."

She said the school will focus on the importance of deep and dramatic play to learning.

But the museum also will partner with Ogden United Promise Neighborhood through use of a \$500,000 grant the museum got from the Utah Legislature for parent education and community awareness.

The grant will fund an interactive book to be released in March for parents of future Ogden and Weber school district children. The book is being created by children's book illustrator Ashley Wolff to help parents track the progress of their children in order to know if they will be ready for kindergarten.

The book will be given out at activities attended by families with preschool children.

"We are really excited about this parent initiative," Goodwin said.

"We want to give it to parents of 3-, 4- and 5- and even 2-year-olds, so you have time."

Goodwin said the museum also will host communitywide celebrations for children who are starting kindergarten.

"We will stress that you have to get ready before you actually start," she said. "We also will stress regular attendance."

Another objective, that high school graduates obtain postsecondary degrees or trade certifications, is being addressed by Ogden-Weber Applied Technology College, among others.

Elsa Zweifel, director of marketing at Ogden-Weber Tech College, said one way the college addresses enrolling high school graduates is by providing \$1,000 scholarships to recent graduates, so they can get started.

"For many of these students who can't afford a traditional education, they can come here and can get a certificate and can earn 35 percent more."

The technical college also attracts high school students to start in their programs before they graduate by offering free classes while they are still in school.

And helping those students is helping the community, officials said.

"If you can get a child to graduate, it will help create a cycle that will help the neighborhood," Oberndorfer said.

Serving children and families in need through improving education and other initiatives is the best way to improve the community as a whole, said Bob Hunter, president of United Way of Northern Utah.

"United Way's work is to lift the lives of the people who live in our communities," he said. "There is no better way to lift lives than to go to those who need it most."

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