



For Immediate Release: February 15, 2015

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Early Childhood Education is a Primary Mission of WHRO

By Bert Schmidt, President and CEO, WHRO

Recent headlines have drawn attention to the significant impact pre-school education has on the future of our children. Early childhood education has proven to be the most critical foundation for future success in school and in life. By providing very young children with foundational reading, math, reasoning and socialization skills, we not only ensure they are well prepared for school, but also save them and our community the cost of long term economic support down the road.

WHRO has been providing early childhood educational services in Hampton Roads for more than 50 years. Founded and owned by the school divisions in southeastern Virginia, WHRO offers children, parents and caregivers a wealth of learning resources. Our children's television shows like *Sesame Street*, *Cat in the Hat* and *Curious George*, teach literacy and numeracy skills and are available on WHRO TV 15 and our dedicated 24-7 channel, *WHRO Kids*. In 2014, we provided over 13,000 hours of educational programs like these to teach foundational skills to pre-school-age children.

All of these shows have in-person training available for parents and caregivers, providing them tools to use with the programs to better educate their children. We visit over 100 schools, libraries and community centers across the community every year to give away books (often the first or only book some children have) to further encourage good study habits at an early age. We read to groups of young children, and encourage others to do so, knowing that a key factor in early childhood development is the number and variety of words to which they are exposed. Something as basic as this is often what divides students in economically challenged communities and second language learners from their more affluent peers.

Last year, WHRO working with partners including child development centers at military bases, early learning centers, the Youth Partnership, FestEvents, The Literacy Partnership, community centers, food banks, and other organizations throughout our region, gave training workshops for more than 2,000 parents and 435 teachers and caregivers. Summer reading camps and other activities were provided for 5,150

children. Campers showed gains in all of the literacy skills presented in the program, including an 84% gain in phonics skills and a 139% gain in word recognition skills. *Martha Speaks Reading Buddies* is now in its fifth year reaching over 1,000 Title 1 elementary school students in our region. In addition to the kindergarteners and first graders mastering thirty-two new vocabulary words, teachers report that 4th and 5th grade participants take their leadership role very seriously, resulting in improved reading skills and a decrease in discipline problems.

WHRO's Raising Readers Van also toured our region, visiting 57 preschools, elementary schools, public libraries and daycare centers, distributing over 6,380 books to children most in need. WHRO has identified nine Title 1 Super Reader Schools, and provided them with resources, professional development, parent training, family literacy nights and PBS KIDS Raising Reader Van visits.

We have created "PBS Kids Corners" in ten public libraries in Hampton, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Virginia Beach with special décor, online games and literacy activities. Every effort is being made to develop in children a love of reading and learning.

In the era of digital learning, one in which WHRO is a recognized leader, we provide blended learning courses, eTextbooks, educational apps and games, plus we make countless other resources available to children and their parents through PBSkids.org. More than 10 million unique visitors each month access educational content and learning opportunities in the form of games, apps and skill-building exercises presented in an entertaining and engaging manner.

Since July 1, with grant funding, WHRO educators have reached nearly twice as many children as last year. WHRO's educational efforts directly support success in school and in life. With the continued assistance of generous benefactors in our community, we can continue to make a meaningful impact in our community and get our children off to a great start.

Bert Schmidt

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