

South Carolina First Steps e-Spotlight

April 21, 2016



“Talk to Me”: Cherokee County Comes Together for New Early Language & Literacy Initiative

On Friday, April 15th, Cherokee County First Steps (CCFS), in partnership with local community organizations and education groups, launched “Talk to Me”, a school readiness effort designed to raise awareness about the importance of helping young children develop their reading and language skills from an early age. The development of this initiative was prompted by results from mCLASS:CIRCLE, the state’s school readiness test taken in the Fall of 2014, which revealed many Cherokee County children were starting Kindergarten without the language and literacy skills needed to be successful in school.

The need for a community-wide effort to work toward ensuring that Cherokee County’s children enter school prepared brought together a group of organizations dedicated to serving children and families, including CCFS. With the test results revealing vocabulary scores to be particularly low, the group made expanding children’s vocabulary a key focus of the effort and looked to the 1995 Hart & Risley study, *The Thirty Million Word Gap*. The study shows that young children in poor families hear approximately 30 million fewer words than children in high-income families. This “word gap” results in decreased vocabulary and language skills, strong predictors of future school performance. The “Talk to Me” initiative started in the hope that more parent talks in the earliest stages of their child’s development will impact future education outcomes.



(From L to R) Dorothy Priester, CCFS Executive Director, Laura Camp, Early Childhood Coordinator, Cherokee County School District, and Dr. Arthur Brewton, Director of Head Start/Early Head Start (Spartanburg/Cherokee) with Piedmont Community Action Agency at the “Talk to Me” launch on Fri., April 15th.



Representatives from participating partner organizations at the “Talk to Me” launch on Fri., April 15th.

For the initiative, CCFS has partnered with Cherokee County School District, United Way of the Piedmont, KNOW(2), Spartanburg Community College– Cherokee County Campus, Gaffney Visitors’ Center, Limestone College, PCA Head Start/Early Head Start, the Institute for Child Success, and the Cherokee County Public Library. Efforts began with a public awareness campaign, which included strategically placing signs in community businesses, partner organizations, and other local establishments. CCFS has participated in numerous education fairs and conducted presentations for partner organization staff and community groups to bring awareness and generate support for the initiative. Now that “Talk to Me” has been rolled out, informational flyers for parents and families will be displayed in grocery stores, doctor’s offices, child care centers, churches and other community settings to encourage adults to talk regularly with young children.

A billboard promoting the campaign will also be placed in a high-traffic area of Gaffney this week, with another planned for the near future.

At the launch last Friday, it was announced that small group meetings, a summer learning program sponsored by KNOW2, and “Talk to Me Success Circles” will begin to take place in the community and meet regularly to help educate parents and teach them effective ways to help their children develop early language skills. CCFS will provide funds, in-kind services, and volunteers for these programs and activities. In addition, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, currently funding a 4K grant for the school district, has recently become a “Talk to Me” partner, which will provide opportunities to further expand early literacy-focused collaboration in Cherokee County.

“Talk to Me” is truly a community-wide effort, and it is the hope that this initiative will become a state and national model for how diverse stakeholders in a community can come together to close the “word gap”. By deliberately connecting early literacy learning to the places children already are and the experiences they are already having, the “Talk to Me” initiative has the potential to help transform the educational and life outcomes of Cherokee County’s children.

For more information on “Talk to Me”, visit www.talktomecherokee.com.