

NCFL In the News...TFLP Long Beach

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A model literacy program

The investment is modest, but the returns rewarding.

When taxpayers are learning to think in terms of trillions, a \$600,000 program may seem too small to mention. But a new literacy program at three Long Beach Unified elementary schools, Chavez, King and McKinley, is an exception.

Its distinction, other than modest cost, is in bringing parents into the classroom with their children to help them overcome language problems together. And at these three schools, the problems are severe.

The schools range from 69 percent Hispanic to 83 percent, and half or more of the students are English language learners. In most cases, parents are struggling even more with the language.

Results of the program, coordinated by the National Center for Family Literacy, appear to be remarkable. The center reports that children exceed their peers in academic performance, 79 percent; motivation to learn, 86 percent; classroom behavior, 91 percent; and classroom involvement, 88 percent. Ninety-two percent of parents say they are better able to help their children with homework, and 91 percent say their children's grades have improved.

Long Beach Unified has a strong record of academic achievement in difficult circumstances, but the challenge is great. At the three schools, more than 90 percent of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged as well as having to deal with language issues.

Long Beach Unified and four other school systems were among 191 that competed for the grants, which are part of a \$3 million expansion of the Toyota-sponsored family literacy program. Toyota has committed more than \$36 million nationally.

The need is great. The inclination of a struggling immigrant family too often is to invest little in education and attach their hopes to finding low-skilled jobs. But those jobs are dwindling, and education is the most promising alternative.

For children, especially those in the early grades served by this family program, the chances of success improve markedly when their parents are involved. For parents, emboldened by new confidence with the language and involvement in the classroom, the outlook also grows brighter.

Americans are learning the hard way that billions, or even trillions of dollars spent unwisely are no assurance of good outcomes. But a model program at the right place and time, even with modest funding, can make all the difference.