

Motivated by information gathered in a small group project during the 2018 Beaufort County Senior Leadership (BCSL) annual program, Charlie Cookson, Elaine Yates, Bruce Donatuti, Trish Lanier and other alumni from the last few years created a spin-off group (BCSL Reading Group) to expand their understanding of the low literacy rate in Beaufort County and identify actions to resolve the problem.

For this is the exact thrust of the BCSL program – to guide participants through a 12-week journey exploring local topics such as History, Heritage & Culture, Local & County Government, the Arts, Education, Environment, Economic Development, Social Services, Health Resources, Military Ties, and Public Safety & Law Enforcement. The BCSL program is designed to tease out participant interest in at least one of these areas to leverage their own knowledge, experience & expertise as a way to channel their energy to have a meaningful impact on Beaufort County through volunteerism. Clemson Extension has run the program for over 20 years. Participants are generally newcomers looking to be informed about the region they now call home.

During the 2018 program on education, interim Superintendent Herb Berg, challenged Beaufort County citizens to help county schools and social organizations drive down the alarming 56% fail rate on the annual standardized 3rd grade language arts exam. Educators all over agree that if a child can't read to standard by the end of 3rd grade, then their entire educational success is in jeopardy.

Kim Statler of the South Carolina Department of Commerce told participants during the economic development session, that the most important challenge to Beaufort County's future economic development is to produce an educated workforce.

"We have learned there is no quick fix to teaching children to read and to pass the 3rd grade reading milestone. On the contrary, the solution requires starting at birth with parents and their newborn. It requires ongoing support through eight years of age. Driving down the fail rate requires dedication, persistence and money," Charlie Cookson said after the group met with tutors, teachers and school leadership – to take a more in-depth look at what has been done in the past and what is being done now to deal with the low literacy rate.

"We have concluded that our best chance at having an impact on the literacy rate is to raise

money and partner with three successful, existing literacy programs,” Charlie added. They are as follows:

Born to Read, Inc— a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit charitable organization led by Janie Ephland promoting early literacy in the Lowcountry. Their mission is to serve families with children who are birth to age three. Volunteers give information and books to help assist with oral language development and early childhood literacy. Materials are in English and Spanish and all families who deliver their babies at Beaufort Memorial, Coastal Carolina and Hilton Head Hospitals are served.

My First Books SC— is a pre-reading, school readiness program for children from birth to age five, led by Nell Killoy. Their objective is to ensure all children in South Carolina enter kindergarten with basic literacy skills essential to first grade advancement and beyond.

Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library— a book gifting program that mails high-quality books to children from birth to age five. After substantial growth and success from their 1995 launch in Sevier County, Tennessee (Dolly’s hometown area), the Imagination Library went national and international in 2003 – sending millions of books to children throughout the country and around the world.

In contrast to other states, neither the state of South Carolina nor the Federal Government subsidize Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library in Beaufort County. The private sector is the only remaining option for raising funds.

The role of the BCSL Reading Group will be to raise funds by appealing to those who understand the following concepts: the value of reading to children from birth; the importance of reaching out to new parents to confirm their buy-in; the need to break the generational cycle of illiteracy; that every child is capable of reading, but some do not have the support and resources available to them; the value of achieving a high school diploma and becoming a contributing member of their local workforce, economy and community; their contributions will fill the need to help a child learn to read, in families whose parents are financially not able.

The work of Nobel Prize winning economist Dr. James Heckman, who is perhaps the world’s leading scientist on early childhood education, says:

- The most important time to focus on learning to read is from birth to 3 years, when 70% of the brain develops. Reading stimulates the side of the brain that helps with mental imagery, understanding and language processing.
- When parents read to their child at least 15 minutes a day, they greatly increase a child's opportunity to become successful in their community. Further, early literacy significantly lowers rates of crime, addiction, school drop-out, teenage pregnancy, obesity, and welfare.
- Over the past 40 years, a growing fraction of US children have been born into disadvantaged families, which often, because of lack of guidance, do not promote their children's physical and emotional development. These are the children who need special help.

Ten newborns at local hospitals are recent recipients selected by *Born to Read* on the basis of family enthusiasm for regular reading. Each baby will be given a "magic wand" for their future – a book a month for 36 months.

We invite contributors to come up with creative ways to fund the program through annual gifting ideas that satisfy their values. For example, a 1953 graduate of Clemson University, Princeton and Georgetown recently contributed a three-year enrollment and is planning to make additional magic wand donations (\$99) on the birthdays of all his grandchildren, instilling a desire to help others in them. He believes in the science behind Dolly Parton's Imaginary Library and the economics of an educated community when its citizens are literate.

Several tutors, including Kay Roller, site director of a BCSL-supported pre-kindergarten reading/tutoring program at Broad River Elementary School, have donated magic wands or more. Most of these folks became tutors either after attending the BCSL program or were recruited by BCSL alumni from Callawassie Island and Sun City and are convinced that because all donations will go to Beaufort County children, it is a significant act of volunteerism and truly an important contribution for the future of our county; as Berg and Statler said, "so much is at risk."

Donations in any amount are welcome. A "Magic Wand" donation of \$99 will provide 36 books, one a month for three years, to one child.

Individuals, organizations and businesses are invited to donate funds on-line to support Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Beaufort County, South Carolina at <https://myfirstbookssc.org/donate-2>. Checks can be made out to:

My First Books SC and mailed to:

My First Books SC

Palmetto Project, Suite 150

4500 Fort Jackson Boulevard

Columbia, SC 29209

Donations go to First Books SC – Beaufort County, which is a 501 (C) (3) program of the Palmetto Project and the South Carolina affiliate of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Its tax ID No. is 57-0807801. All donations will be acknowledged with a tax receipt.

In addition, the BCSL Reading Group is managing tutor volunteers; and in need of assistance in collecting donations from residential communities, hospitals, university alumni associations, and clubs and organizations – reading ambassadors, if you will. The goal is to allow for 3,000 Beaufort County newborn to age five children to be a beneficiary of Dolly Parton's Imagination library, Beaufort, South Carolina. Lastly, we need reading ambassadors to enlist organizations in which you participate (church, social groups, hospitals and schools) to encourage parents (or families and friends) to read to their kids every day. Volunteers are needed to work with groups that care for the health of these children too!

You are invited to send an email to BCReading99@gmail.com to express your desire to participate in this very important reading campaign.

Writer's Note:

In these COVID-19 pandemic times, when educational leaders are navigating their way through unprecedented planning exercises to secure the health and safety of students, staff and teachers, our at-risk readers are in an even more dire situation. Private funding and community volunteerism in support of education has never been more critical.

Terry Rice is a 2014 Alumna of Beaufort County Senior Leadership