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Early literacy program coming to Mundelein

By **Russell Lissau**

Mundelein's Fremont Public Library is launching a new outreach program designed to boost early literacy in the community, particularly among kids who speak English as a second language.

The effort is called Raising a Reader Lake County. It's a national literacy program's first foray into the North or Northwest suburbs.

The two-year program will launch this fall with 80 kids who are enrolled in Mundelein Elementary District 75's bilingual preschool, program coordinator Doug Lillydahl said.

"These are kids who are just developing their literacy skills and understanding how a book works," said Lillydahl, a Libertyville resident who's the communication arts director at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire.

The library is helping to fund the effort, pledging \$16,000 to the project, youth services librarian Maggie Masterson said.

"We are always striving to find new ways to connect with the community," she said.

Organizers also are seeking community and corporate sponsors.

The project's centerpiece will be a weekly book exchange.

Each child will get a bag with four books per week. Bicultural and bilingual books will be provided.

"We're giving the kids the bags Monday, and we collect them Thursday or Fridays," Lillydahl said.

But Raising a Reader is about more than getting books into kids' hands. It also trains parents or other caregivers how to engage children by reading aloud, how to talk about books and how to make reading a daily habit.

"The payoff is certainly the book, but also the cuddling time with mom and dad," Lillydahl said. "How often do kids get the full attention of a parent?"

For years, libraries tried to attract tween and teen patrons with programs, special areas and other efforts. But for the last two years or so, the Fremont staff has been focused on encouraging younger readers, especially kids up to 8 years old, Masterson said.

The reading skills kids develop in their early years set the stage for the rest of their lives, she said.

Raising a Reader operates in 32 states, helping 118,000 children or families learn to read and how to appreciate reading. It's particularly prevalent on the East Coast.

Schools, libraries and other agencies typically lead the efforts.

In Illinois, programs exist in Chicago, South suburban Matteson and downstate Augusta.

The Fremont Public Library serves much of Mundelein and parts of several area communities. Participants in the program don't need to be library patrons, although getting them to visit and enjoy the facility at 1170 N. Midlothian Road is a secondary goal, Lillydahl said.

If Raising a Reader is a success in the Mundelein area, Lillydahl hopes it expands across Lake County.

"It doesn't matter where you are or where you come from, there are kids who benefit from early language literacy skills as well as the parent-child bond that comes out of this program," Lillydahl said.

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