Never too young to be read to

Early Literary Consortium ties graduation rates to childhood reading

BY LAUREN DALEY

NEW BEDFORD — When it comes to improving graduation rates, the key is to start reading early, said Pam Kuechler.

And she means early. "As soon as infants are born, parents should be reading to them," said Kuechler, coordinator of the Greater New Bedford Early Literacy Consortium.

Founded in 2008, the Early Literacy Consortium seeks to promote reading at an early age, improve school readiness and, ultimately, to improve high school graduation rates by focusing on the literacy of very young children — chiefly newborns to 3-year-olds.

Part of the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts, and funded through the Acushnet Foundation, the consortium is comprised of some 70 members who work in child care, public service, and early education along with local business owners, and employees at municipal agencies, including St. Luke's Hospital, the New Bedford Public Library, Buttonwood Park Zoo, the New Bedford School Department, UMass Dartmouth, the United Way,PACE and Bristol Community College.

Together, they seek to ensure that all SouthCoast children are given the opportunity to build a foundation for lifelong success.

Higher reading rates at Grade 3, relates to higher graduation rates, studies show.

"The investment in early literacy is an investment in dropout prevention," said Kuechler, who is also the executive director of the Massachusetts Head Start Association.

"When kids start an educational experience in a positive way early in life, that's how they're going to be successful adults," she said. "We try to help parents understand that they are their children's first teachers."

Kuechler cited research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. She also mentioned an executive study done by Strategies for Children, a statewide group promoting universal early education and ways of developing reading success.

According to an August 2007 report from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard: "Early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health."

The report goes on to say: "The period between birth and three years is a time of rapid cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and motor development. Explosive growth in vocabulary, for example, starts at around 15-18 months and continues into the preschool years."

Since its inception, consortium members have worked to put together and hand out "Welcome Bags" to new parents at St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford and Charlton Memorial Hospital in Fall River. In 2011, consortium members handed out more than 800 bags in English, Spanish and Portuguese languages, Kuechler said.

The Welcome Bags are stuffed with board books, library card application forms, a free one-year family zoo membership, and information on literacy and health care resources. The Welcome Bags also introduce new parents to the Reach Out and Read Program, through which babies receive a book at each of their doctor checkups through age 5.

The consortium currently covers mostly the New Bedford area, but has goals of expanding to cover the entire SouthCoast and Fall River, said Kuechler.

The consortium participated in two AHA! (Arts, History, Architecture) Nights in 2012, and plans on participating in at least that in 2013. Members also promote local library story times and other events that a consortium member might be hosting or promoting.

The consortium also takes part in the Week of the Young Child Family Fun Day in April each year at Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational/Technical High School; has hosted a "Get Ready for School" event at Bay Village in New Bedford, has promoted events at ArtWorks in New Bedford, and has hosted parenting education workshops.

"Some new parents might think, 'My infant can't benefit from reading.' But that's not true. From the moment we start interacting with a child,