

Never too young to be read to

Early Literary Consortium ties graduation rates to childhood reading

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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 Literary
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 73
members who work in child
care, public services, 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
opportunities to build "a
foundation for lifelong

success."

Higher reading rates at
Grade 3, relates to higher grad
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 500
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

