

GREAT GRANT STORIES

The Lyle S. Hallman Foundation

Starting from Scratch to Help Kids Learn to Read

This is a story about a simple question having a profound outcome. In 2001 philanthropist Lyle Hallman asked a retired principal, “Are there any programs for volunteers to help very young children who are having trouble learning to read?” Unable to find a literacy program designed for volunteers helping young children, the principal decided to develop one. Lyle’s question launched Strong Start® a community project in the Kitchener-Waterloo area designed for children aged 4-10 years and the Sounds and Words program. It started out as a pilot project in two schools and within seven years, Strong Start® became a registered charity with many supporters and its program spread to 140 sites. The Letter, Sounds and Words program was designed for use in a variety of settings but, but operates in schools where the demand has been great.



Photo credit: Lynda Silvester

Last year over 1,800 volunteers felt the joy of seeing over 1,900 children delight in playing games and activities in a 10-week program to understand how letters and sounds make words. Schools recruit their own volunteers and Strong Start® provides the training, manuals, materials and ongoing support throughout the implementation. The success of the program is due in large part to the manner in which the program is implemented. The structure that supports the implementation makes it possible for volunteers,

with four hours of training, to be independent in delivering the program successfully in a variety of settings and it minimizes the time and effort required of the staff of the organization using the program at their site. Now that it is in almost every Public and Catholic school in the Waterloo Region, Strong Start® is also considering a new literacy program for preschoolers and involvement in other community literacy initiatives.

The Letters Sounds and Words program (a 10-week program

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for 5, 6 year-olds) and its delivery model were designed with an understanding of the factors at play in schools, for community volunteers and for funders. Evaluation of the program and its implementation model was important from the outset. Results, both statistically and anecdotally are consistently outstanding. In 2008, Wilfrid Laurier University conducted a study of Strong Start®. An extensive evaluation concluded that, “Strong Start® is a healthy and effective program with a solid organizational home. The findings provide substantial evidence that the Strong Start® program is achieving the outcomes they desire.” The researchers concluded, “We hope that the program will continue to be an important asset in the Waterloo Region and beyond.” Throughout its short history Strong Start® has received requests for the program from other communities, and it is prepared to develop a model to take the project



Photo credit: Terry Scott White Photography

to scale at the provincial level.

The Lyle S. Hallman Foundation provided seed money for this innovative program and the foundation continues to provide financial support. The trustees and staff have been integrally involved in capacity-building strategies for Strong Start® to become the successful organization it is today. The organization has also received support from other funders, enriched the lives

of thousands of volunteers and supported families and professionals who focus on helping children succeed.

The Lyle S. Hallman Foundation is proud that it raised the question of how to address a need; took the risk in supporting a project ‘starting from scratch’ and acted on a principle of engaged philanthropy. The result is a community that has greatly improved its capacity to ensure that all children learn to read.