National child literacy program comes to Columbus

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The second Jumpstart tutoring program in the state will begin at Mississippi University for Women when MUW students gather at local preschools to tutor low-income children and help them with literacy skills.

Jumpstart is a national program which started around 20 years ago to help children learn reading skills before starting kindergarten and to offer assistance to pre-school teachers who are often far outnumbered by a class of bouncing, chattering 3- and 4-year-olds.

The program is still -small in the South, according to Rose Ford, site manager for Jumpstart at MUW. Though Jumpstart has a presence in big cities like Atlanta, it has yet to make as much of a splash in Mississippi, where currently only the University of Mississippi has the program for its college students. This year, the chair of MUW's Department of Education, Dr. Monica Riley, worked with the head of UM's Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction to bring college students into pre-schools in Columbus.

It's an important program because children from lower income families start kindergarten up to 60 percent behind their more affluent peers in terms of literacy skills, Ford said.

"If they start kindergarten behind, more than likely, they'll stay behind," she said.

Closing the gap

By sending tutors into local preschools to talk to the kids, read to them and help them learn, Jumpstart hopes to begin closing that gap.

On Thursday, a group of MUW students stopped by First Assembly Daycare, one of the local preschools where MUW's Jumpstart program will work. The tutors -- called Corps members -- read a story to a class of 3- and 4-year-olds before splitting groups of children into smaller groups where they sat together talking about names and letters.

The group activity is one of many designed to improve children's conversation skills, Ford said. Every activity is part of the larger Jumpstart curriculum which includes hours worth of stories and activities for young children. The activities focus on introducing kids to letters and engaging them in conversation.

"The curriculum is decided by researchers (and) curriculum developers," Ford said. "They've come up

with the entire session plans, so it is very strategic, the activities. Everything has a purpose."

Schedule

The Corps members oversee 20 Jumpstart sessions total. Each session lasts two hours and is planned around a particular book that the Corps members read to the children that week. The first session that week will focus mostly on reading the book for enjoyment, Ford said. The second session will go more in-depth. The activities will also relate to the book. And there are many activities, some focusing on art, others on writing and still others on solving puzzles or getting the basics in science and math.

But the primary goal of the activities is to build the children's vocabularies and engage them in conversation, Ford said.

In small groups, Corps members work with about three children each, reading books and having conversations with the children.

Corps members must be organized, energetic and patient, said Ford. Above all, they love working with children and they love service.

Though the university is targeting education majors, Ford said any college student can apply. The students have to fill out online applications and do interviews before they are chosen to become Corps members. Once they've been chosen, they go through 30 hours of training before setting foot in a classroom. In addition to the Jumpstart sessions twice a week -- in which they lead activities -- the Corps members are required to fulfill 300 hours of classroom assistance during which they help the teacher. Ford said it is one more way Jumpstart tries to cut down on the adult-child ratio in preschools.

At the end of their 300 classroom assistance hours and their twice-per-week Jumpstart sessions, the students receive an educational award of $1,200.

College students interested in becoming a Corps member should apply at jstart.org/apply.