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Elgin partnership brings learning to the Laundromat

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Sisters Natalie, 6, and Mia Muñoz, 9, of Pingree Grove, work on spelling their names in foam letters with Boys & Girls Club of Elgin junior staff volunteers Jose Portugal, 13, of Elgin, left, and Xitlali Garcia, 14, of South Elgin, at the JetXpress Laundromat in Elgin. The Elgin Partnership for Early Learning has put a literacy program there targeting the birth-to-5 population. The group is providing storytime and literacy resources to at-risk families, mostly Latino.

Rather than while away time between rinse and dryer cycles at the neighborhood Laundromat, sisters Mia and Natalia Muñoz work on crafts with volunteers from the Boys & Girls Club of Elgin.

"It's fun. And they are also really nice," Mia, 9, a fourth-grader at Gary Wright Elementary school in Hampshire, said as she and Natalia, 6, spelled their names with foam letters on craft paper.

That's the kind of engagement the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning hopes to promote at Laundromats throughout the city.

The group -- comprising 65 partnering agencies, including Elgin Area School District U-46, Elgin Community College, United Way of Elgin and Gail Borden Public Library -- launched the "Language in the Laundromat" literacy program this spring. Inspired by the [Clinton Foundation's Too Small to Fail](#) initiative, it provides storytime and literacy resources to at-risk families, mostly Latino, targeting the birth-to-5 population.

In a corner of the JetXpress Laundromat on Dundee Avenue in Elgin, volunteers have set up a mini library for children to peruse books in English and Spanish. Bilingual messaging posters on the walls, washers and dryers emphasize turning wash time into "talk time," and encouraging families to read with their children.

Motorola Solutions donated 500 books and Elgin Township gave \$4,000 toward the effort. Community partners, such as the Boys & Girls Club and Gail Borden Public Library in Elgin, come in weekly and read to children, and engage them in activities

while their parents wash clothes. Volunteers will help year round and during after-school hours once classes resume.

"It's kind of a platform for other partners to come in and help serve families and meet them where they are," said Amber Peters, Elgin Partnership for Early Learning collaboration director. "Research shows families are in laundromats about 2½ hours a week. It's the perfect opportunity to meet people in their environment ... and share resources."

The goal of this initiative is to prepare more children for school when they begin kindergarten.

Sixty percent of students entering U-46, the state's second-largest school district, are not meeting kindergarten readiness benchmarks. A key readiness measure is whether children can master five key concepts -- talk, play, read, write and do -- often learned in preschool.

"(We) know that we are not able to enroll every child from the area in preschool," Peters said. "Sometimes that's a cultural thing. There may not be awareness of preschool or families might not have the money. We just want them to have opportunities outside of their home."

Children from high-income families are exposed to 30 million more words than children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, per one study.

The Elgin Partnership aims to narrow that word gap by expanding its literacy program to places where low-income families frequent, such as local and ethnic grocery stores, playgrounds and pediatrician offices.

"There's learning opportunities for (families) in all of these places," Peters said. "Like at a grocery store, you might be talking about the color of a fruit, the letter it starts with. It's all about talking to your kids. It could expand in the community huge, if we can get the funding for it."

Peters is writing a grant for funding for messaging and materials, and is seeking community sponsors.

The group also supports home visiting programs promoting literacy provided by [U-46 Parents As Teachers](#), [VNA Health Care](#), [Kane County Health Department](#), [ChildServ](#), [Family Focus](#), [DayOne Pact](#), and [Greater Elgin Family Care Center](#). They aim to build a "pipeline" of support to help at-risk children transition from home to school so they don't fall through the cracks.

"We all have to work together if we are going to create change in the community," Peters said. "We've got to align our services to have children ready for school and life. We are not waiting for the families to come to us. We are going to them. We really need every agency, every business to think what little piece can we do to change early learning in the community."