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## Literacy and the 30 million word gap

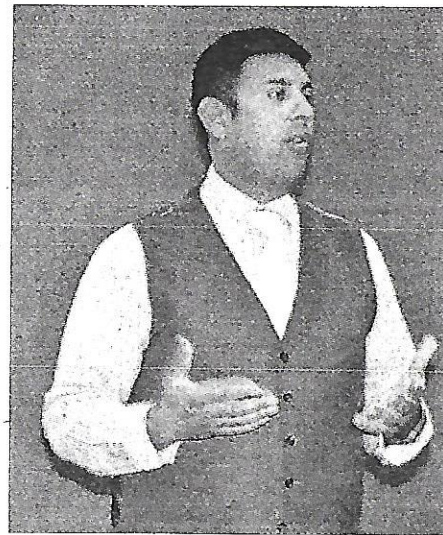
Jeremy Cooney talks about Rochester's literacy initiatives

By **NORA A. JONES**  
Daily Record Correspondent

Studies show that the average child on welfare is exposed to 616 words per hour, a child in a working class family is exposed to double that (1,251 words per hour), and children in professional families experience 2,153 words per hour. [Hart & Risley, 2003: "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3."] This is a combination of spoken and written communication.

Vocabulary development during the preschool years is related to success in school. Those who get to adulthood without adequate reading skills sometimes turn to organizations like Literacy Volunteers of Rochester (LVR) which assists more than 500 adult learners each year with their reading and speaking skills.

But literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century encompasses more than reading. To be employable and productive in the community, one must have basic math literacy and digital literacy. Some jobs



Jeremy Cooney, chief of staff, City of Rochester, reviews the many literacy initiatives that target children in homes where parents don't routinely read to their children.

applications can only be completed online, and without both language skills and computer skills, those opportunities are out of reach.

LVR continues to use one-on-one tutoring to teach reading and many of the students seeking help are non-English speaking

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immigrants. LVR also offers training in math and computer skills and is always looking for more volunteers to meet the demand. Visit [www.literacyrochester.org](http://www.literacyrochester.org) for more information.

LVR supporter Nanette Nocon of Nocon & Associates underwrites an LVR lunch series where guest speakers talk about topics of interest. This month's presentation was by Jeremy Cooney, chief of staff for Mayor Lovely Warren, sharing information about literacy initiatives in the City of Rochester.

"Schools are critical to the city's success, but the mayor's office doesn't control the schools," Cooney pointed out. "So how do we utilize city services to augment school programs? Sixty-one percent of low income families do not have infant and toddler age appropriate books in their homes."

He shared details about several programs that encourage parents to read to their kids and provide after-school reading opportunities.

"Raising a Reader" is the name of a national program which the City of Rochester adopted locally in 2012. The program helps families develop, practice, and maintain a home literacy routine. It bridges a gap by rotating books into homes and helping families connect with libraries.

Geared to families with children from birth to age 3, Raising a Reader is funded by the Friends of the Rochester Public Library and the Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation, and further supported by AmeriCorps members. Additional AmeriCorps members provide early childhood curriculum to increase language, social, and

cognitive development.

"Research shows there is a 30 million word gap in vocabulary between those raised in poverty and those with middle income or higher," Cooney explained. "Family engagement is perhaps the most influential factor affecting literacy."

Cooney described a number of additional initiatives, targeted at pre-kindergarten through third grade, indicating that children who aren't sufficiently literate by third grade generally don't finish school.

"We have a young mayor with a young daughter of her own," Cooney noted. "She convened an Early Learning Council soon after taking office, and initiated the '3 to 3 Initiative' – which targets children between the ages of three to third grade."

A number of branch libraries run a Summer Reading Program, where students are committed to read at least 20 minutes a day every day during the summer months. Last year at least 30 high-performing RCSD high school students were employed to help city children maintain and improve their literacy skills over the summer.

The Rochester Public Library has established a free book distribution network throughout the city, with more than 150, including corner stores, barber shops, the Public Market, and Family Court. This has had a tremendous impact in terms of getting books into the hands of city residents.

Cooney also talked about some adult literacy efforts specifically through certain library branches and the Maplewood YMCA. "Operation Transformation Rochester" is one of the city's programs that helps residents make healthy choices and gain skills, including financial literacy.

"Teaching people to open a bank account and avoid

“So how do we utilize city services to augment school programs? Sixty-one percent of low income families do not have infant and toddler age appropriate books in their homes.”

JEREMY COONEY

check cashing vendors may seem like common sense to some of us, but not if that's all you've ever experienced," Cooney said.

Many of the recreation centers have summer learning labs, after-school homework help, reading programs, urban gardening projects, creative arts, earth explorer expeditions, and hands on science and technology activities.

For the "Books and Bears" program, residents donate new books and teddy bears to the Rochester Police Department to be given to children when officers respond to domestic violence issues.

Mayor Warren's administration has developed and distributed a "5 Key Things" brochure which is included with every new birth certificate that is mailed out to families in Monroe County. The brochure provides parents with key information regarding how they can help their child succeed in school.

For the Q & A portion, one audience member asked how the effectiveness of these programs is measured. Because Raising a Reader has been around for a few years, test results show that learning loss is reduced and learning ability is improved. Some programs are too new to show trends.