

United Way focusing on early education

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The United Way of Lake & Sumter Counties has announced it has joined Florida's 31 other local United Ways in making improved early education for children a priority during the upcoming 2014 Florida Legislative Session.

The most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows 73 percent of low-income fourth graders in Florida and 61 percent of all fourth graders are not proficient in reading. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the end of the third grade marks the point when children transition from learning to read to reading in order to learn other subjects.

"Children who read proficiently by the end of the third grade are more likely to graduate from high school and to be economically successful in life," the foundation states in its latest report, "Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters."

By 2020, the United States is expected to face a shortage of 1.5 million workers with college degrees but will have a surplus of 6 million individuals without a high school diploma because they lack necessary educational credentials, the foundation states.

Locally, the United Way of Lake & Sumter Counties already has been working on the problem, partnering with Lake County schools to improve third-grade reading levels.

"Our long term goal is that 85 percent of third graders enrolled in Lake County Public Schools will read at or above grade level by 2014," said Sue Cordova, the organization's CEO.

As part of the United Way of Lake & Sumter Counties' Rally for Reading initiative, five of the poorest performing elementary schools were selected, each reflecting a different geographic, ethnic and economic mix in the county. These were Clermont Elementary, Eustis Elementary, Triangle Elementary, Beverly Shores Elementary and Groveland Elementary.

At each school, a reading team — consisting of the principal, the third-grade teachers and a literacy coach — has been formed, goals were set, and barriers or problems were identified, along with what financial assistance was needed to make improvements. The United Way recently received a \$5,000 grant, which was funneled into Clermont Elementary's program to use retired teachers for after-school intensive reading enrichment sessions for 1 1/2 hours, two days a week.

"Children that are reading at grade level are less likely to drop out, experience a teen pregnancy, or have cases through Department of Juvenile Justice," he said. "Every child deserves to read," said Don Lucas, chairman of the local United Way's board of directors.

To find out more, call Cordova at 352-787-7530.