

## Raising readers: Grant to help transform early childhood development on the South Coast

For years, the “opportunity gap” between middle income, largely native English-speaking, and lower income, native Spanish-speaking, children has been a source of serious concern, for parents and teachers alike, in the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District – and the greatest predictor of future academic struggle or success.

By the time children are old enough for preschool, it’s often very late to catch up: many students from Spanish-speaking households, especially ones where parents do not have strong literacy skills, enter preschool with a literacy and numeracy deficit, lacking foundational vocabulary and number recognition in their home language. This translates into additional challenges in learning English.

“Kids get to preschool and may not have learned about books. You can begin to imagine the implications of that for learning,” says Puente Academic Director Suzanne Abel.

That could change very soon. In June, the Los Altos-based [Heising-Simons Foundation](#) approved funding for Puente’s brand-new Family Engagement Impact Initiative. This two-year grant is a game changer. It will allow Puente and its principal partner, the La Honda Pescadero Unified School District, to strengthen the bonds between home and school, while promoting early literacy and numeracy to all South Coast families – well before children enter preschool.

The Initiative is a bold effort to provide strong early care and education for the youngest and most vulnerable children on the South Coast. All children deserve a strong start. The Initiative leverages resources to close the achievement gap for young children on the South Coast by strengthening the bonds between home and school and promoting early literacy and numeracy to all South Coast families.

Through a committed partnership between Puente and LHPUSD, ongoing procurement and coordination of public and private funds, the Initiative envisions a South Coast community where:

- In-home care providers are networked, highly trained and supported through local as well as regional initiatives.
- Parents trust their children to safe, nurturing, care environments, with the choice to select from among in-home and center-based options.
- Families engage in daily literacy and numeracy activities through local as well as regional initiatives
- Families and program/school staff work seamlessly together to identify and engage families community wide to participate in the Initiative.
- Puente and LHPUSD staff has knowledge and expertise at all levels to identify and intervene early to support family and child referrals for outside services.
- Preschool aged children attend preK all-day for a longer year, minimizing multiple transitions throughout the day.
- Families have the knowledge and skills to advocate for their children in the school setting.
- Teachers have the resources they need to build strong school-home relationships.
- Community leaders advocate for resources and policies at every level of government to support early learning initiatives and local/state leaders recognize the challenges faced on South Coast.
- Children enter preK with age-appropriate social-emotional, literacy and numeracy readiness skills.

- Families that have experienced trauma or maternal depression have the knowledge and skills needed to create resilient home environments where children can succeed.

The grant, the largest Puente has received from a foundation, totals \$399,971.88 to be spent over two years. The Heising-Simons Foundation was established in 2007 by husband and wife trustees, Mark Heising and Liz Simons.

Together, Puente and the school district hope to rewrite the rules for all young children, from enriching their home lives with books to providing stable, long-term, professional childcare for the community.

The grant will help train parents to read with their kids as part of [Raising a Reader](#), a book-bag program that loans free books to families and gets kids used to interacting with them. During “Family Nights,” their parents will be taught techniques to “read” to their kids – even if the parents themselves are not literate, and even if their children are too young to read.



“It’s not necessarily important to read the book. You can do a lot of storytelling around a picture book. The important thing about sitting down with a book is the bond over language,” says school district Superintendent Amy Wooliever, who co-led the grant development process with Abel.

Vocabulary is even more important than whether the child’s first language is English or Spanish, says Wooliever. If a child is curious and knows how to learn, that child can translate her learning into English once she speaks the language.

Puente will also implement [Abriendo Puertas](#), a national curriculum designed to engage Latino parents in best practices of early childhood development, literacy and health, and to value dual language acquisition. Puente will hire staff to implement both programs.

Other changes are imminent and were already in the works before the grant. These include extended day preschool in Pescadero (currently the school district’s preschool program ends before noon), and professional childcare training for Puente staff and the unofficial network of local women care for children at their homes during the day.



These changes began with a planning grant from the Heising-Simons Foundation in 2013. Puente and the school district formed a steering committee with local leaders and parents, facilitated by consultants Alfredo Vergara-Lobo and Melina Salvador, who helped the committee process data from detailed surveys of parents and childcare providers, learn what it takes to implement evidence-based programs like Raising a Reader and Abriendo Puertas, and ensure that all voices were heard.

“Everyone, to a person, said ‘we need a child care center of some kind, we need a physical center where we can bring our kids,’” says Abel. Parents also spoke to the need for longer preschool days, which prompted the school district to commit to meeting that need, regardless of whether it receives outside funding to do so.

The notion of a childcare and family resource center has appealed to Puente for a long time. Pescadero has no central place for parents to play with kids and interact with each other. No licensed daycare, no public parks, and no library.

“We don’t have any cultural place for families to access books and reading materials,” says Wooliever.

Today, that dream is closer than ever. The Heising-Simons Foundation grant will permit Puente and the school district to work with a consultant on a plan for a childcare center that would be affordable for all. Puente will also explore the feasibility of establishing a local park for families with the San Mateo County Planning Commission.

Wooliever says one of the great pleasures of this planning process is the close relationship that she and her fellow administrators have developed with Puente staff. “I don’t know that we’ve ever had such a collaborative project with Puente before,” she adds. It brought both organizations together around a common vision, and together, they hope to transform early childhood learning on the South Coast.

« [Puente summer youth interns work in the real world](#)

• **July 2014**

**In this issue:**

- [Raising readers: Grant to help transform early childhood development on the South Coast](#)
- [Puente summer youth interns work in the real world](#)
- [Why I give to Puente: Lorraine Eberhardt](#)
- [Second Annual Puente 5k/10k Fun Run/Walk and more](#)
- [What Puente Needs This Month](#)
- [Career and Volunteer Opportunities](#)



Copyright © 2014