

Spring, Texas, with only 76% of the children in third grade approaching or at grade level in reading (TEA, 2019), has a literacy problem. Among minorities the rate drops to 60% for Black children and 64% for Hispanic children. We need to address this problem from the beginning. It is imperative for parents to recognize they are their child's first teacher. It is imperative for parents to understand that "Critical periods open during the first two years that provide optimal learning for speech and language to be absorbed, and it is during this time that the foundations are laid for future reading proficiency and school readiness" (Towell et al., 2021). The seed is planted. The roots begin to grow. "Reading aloud is a research-based strategy that helps children of all ages develop a love of literacy, grow their vocabularies, read independently and think critically" (Casaola, 2016; Cecil et al., 2015; Oczkus, 2012, as cited in Towell et al., 2021). The board book, literature, and access to the library set the mom and baby on the path.

Spring, TX Baby connects the new family to the community. The community is a melting pot of people: 63% White, 22.7% Black, 31.9% Hispanic, 2.9% Asian (US Census, n.d.) and a growing number of people from the Middle East. The pages of the book reveal diverse babies and their parents/caregivers, strolling through well-known and famous settings around the community: NASA, downtown Houston, the rodeo, Minute Maid Park (Astros' stadium), Old Town Spring, and the Barbara Bush Branch Library. Because 25.9% of Spring's population speaks a language other than English at home (US Census, n.d.), the board books will also be printed in the three other languages most represented in our community: Spanish, Chinese, and Urdu. Families will see themselves in the books. Moms, dads, and relatives will enjoy introducing Baby to his new community.

Collaborating with Houston Methodist Willowbrook Hospital will meet HCPL's goal to establish corporate partnerships (E. Melton, personal communication, August 27, 2021). Seeking funding through grants, a goal set forth for HCPL by E. Melton (personal communication, August 27, 2021), along with corporate and individual donor partnerships is necessary to support the initial cost of printing. Close to 4000 babies are born each year at Houston Methodist Willowbrook Hospital (Michel, K., 2020). The Barbara Bush Friends of the Library will have their "fundraising capabilities supported and strengthened" (E. Melton, personal communication, August 27, 2021) through the sale of *Spring, TX Baby* books in their bookstore (located in the library) and at community outreaches.

Partnering with a local hospital to give every newborn baby the board book *Spring, TX Baby*, meets the mission, vision and several goals of the Harris County Public Library system. The Growing Readers program will now encompass newborn babies through children 10 years old. How do we develop the relationship with the new moms and their babies over the weeks and months ahead? And, up ahead, on the path, are middle school children and high schoolers. How can the library enrich their lives?

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