

## Umatilla Morrow Head Start Gets SMART with Boomer Volunteers

by Maren Symonds

If you are a resident of Umatilla, Morrow, Grant, Gilliam, Wheeler, Sherman, or Wallowa counties, **education matters**. Among those aged 25 and older, high school drop-outs earn 17% less than high school graduates and less than half of college graduates. They're also 225% more likely to live at or below the Federal Poverty Level than the rest of the population.<sup>1</sup> The sad reality for many of them is that their fates were sealed before they entered kindergarten.

While genetics certainly plays a role, a child's brain development is influenced heavily by the environment. Proper nutrition and healthy external stimulants support the formation of billions of neural connections that govern emotions, motor skills, behavioral control, logic, language, and memory. For example, the simple act of reading stories to young children helps them associate sounds with objects and then printed words. Differences in literacy manifest by age 3, with children born to college-aged caregivers having 2-3 times the vocabulary of those raised by high school drop outs.<sup>2</sup> Children who do not bridge the literacy gap and become proficient readers by third grade are 4 times more likely to leave high school before receiving their diplomas.<sup>3</sup>

Founded in 1987, Umatilla-Morrow County Head Start, Inc. (UMCHS) serves children and families in the seven rural Eastern Oregon counties noted above. Their comprehensive child development and educational programs engage the entire family in a child's growth. Eighteen educational centers and seven service locations support:

- 481 Head Start/Oregon Pre-kindergarten children and their families
- 71 infants and toddlers through Early Head Start
- 4,450 clients in the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program
- 38 Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) clients
- 35 Healthy Start families
- 55 Family Support and Connections (FSC) families
- Child Care Resource & Referral



Volunteerism has been a vital element of UMCHS services since its inception. Volunteers provide classroom assistance, child advocacy, mentoring, home visits, administrative support, and a host of other valuable services. With grant funds from Oregon Community Foundation's

<sup>1</sup> Source: 2007-2011 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>2</sup> Source: Center of the Developing Child, Harvard University

<sup>3</sup> Source: Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation, by Donald J. Hernandez, 2012

Boomer & Babies initiative, UMCHS has had the means to promote volunteer engagement among older adults.

“Classroom settings were a natural fit for Baby Boomer volunteers. We needed stable, reliable adults to serve our vulnerable young children,” said Jesus Rome, UMCHS Volunteer Coordinator. “Boomers fit the bill. When they say they’ll be there, they’ll be there!”

With a dependable cadre of committed volunteers, UMCHS was able to give a much-needed infusion of energy to its pre-Kindergarten SMART (Start Making A Reader Today) literacy program. Through this initiative, SMART volunteers read one-on-one with children for a minimum of two 30-minute sessions per week. The children learn to become more confident and successful readers while forging relationship with caring adults. *And they figure out that reading can be fun!*

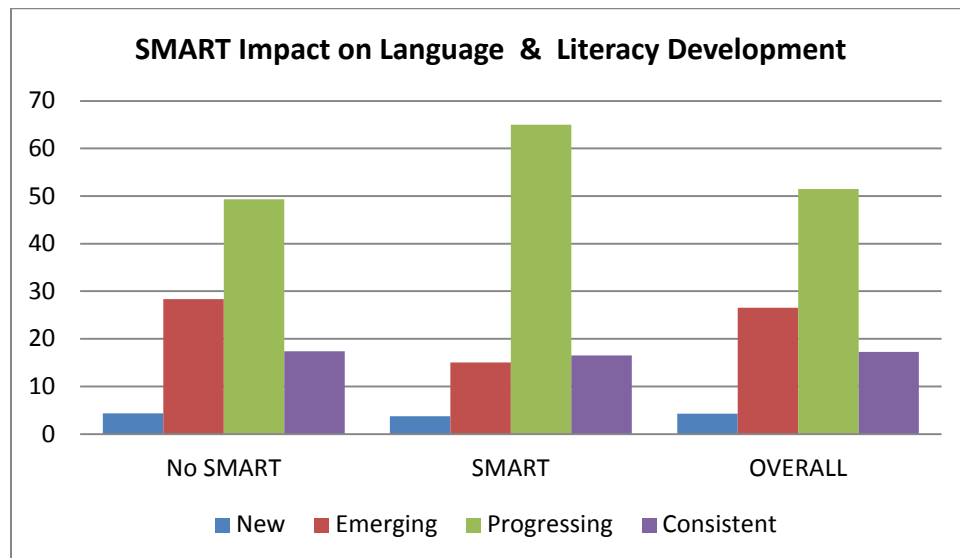


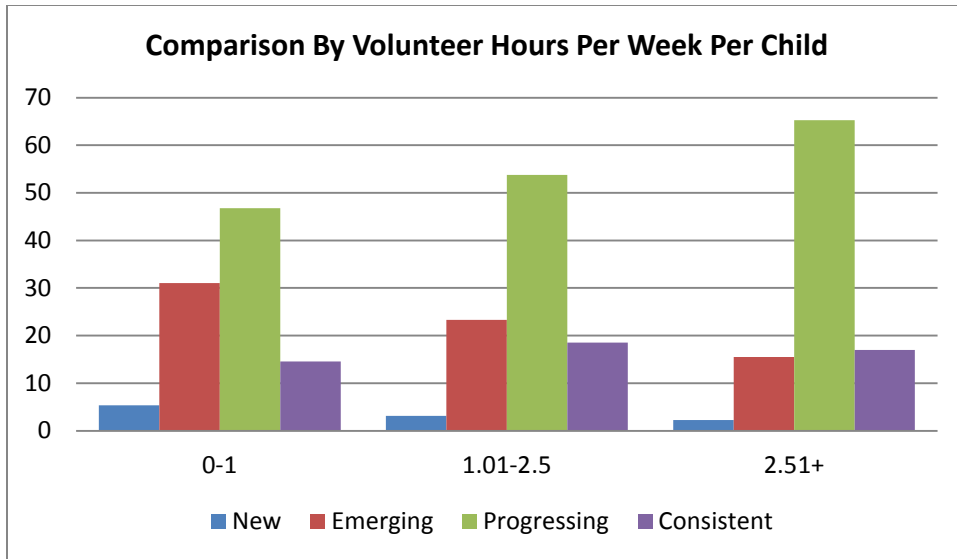
After several months of deployment, UMCHS measured language development and literacy skills between children who were paired with SMART volunteers and those who were not. They also assessed the impact of increasing the amount of literacy support.

Teachers rated students based on the percent of time the children demonstrated age appropriate literacy skills:

- New: <10% of the time
- Emerging: 11-50% of the time
- Progressing: 51-80% of the time
- Consistent: 80+% of the time

The findings speak for themselves:





Scientists and economists alike tell us that evidence-based intervention in early childhood delivers a considerable return on investment. With volunteers ready, willing, and able to assist trained early childhood professionals, we improve the odds that our efforts bear fruit. The harvest we reap benefits children, their families, and our communities.

Boomers and Babies is a project of The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF). Additional funding for the project comes from The Atlantic Philanthropies, with additional support from the PGE Foundation, Knowledge Universe, the Juan Young Trust, the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, and several OCF Donor Advised Funds.