

From All Angles: Holistic Approach Employs Family Literacy to Break Cycle of Poverty in Dallas

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DALLAS (May 23, 2019) – For Erica Blanco, taking time out of her busy life for Toyota Family Learning classes is an investment in herself and her four children. The single mom from South Dallas is working to strengthen family bonds by learning how to better communicate and spending more quality time with her kids.

“No more excuses,” Blanco said. “I used to come home saying, ‘I’m too tired,’ or ‘we don’t have the money for that.’ I just paid the bills. Now, I budget for going out to eat, going to the movies. We’ve also found out there are tons of things to do for free in our community – and it’s fun.”

Blanco joined Toyota Family Learning at one of three new sites in Dallas that are part of a broader strategy that approaches literacy in a holistic manner. By working with parents, children, families and local non-profit organizations, families are given a chance to become more economically self-sufficient.

The program is a partnership between Toyota and the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), which works to break the generational cycle of poverty through family literacy.

Toyota Family Learning helps parents become more involved in their children’s schools and the community by

creating and enhancing social networks. The program includes Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time®, Parent Time classes and Family Service Learning projects.

Parents set goals for themselves and their families. Blanco's family goal is to be healthier and to exercise. Her personal goal is to stay on top of her finances by budgeting and raising her credit score.

"Since we began the program, my credit score has gotten better," Blanco said. "Also, a big difference is I don't procrastinate anymore. I've taken the challenge and have stepped up. I've made a commitment to go to every class and it has paid off."

A Family Learning Community

"Working with Toyota and community partners, we're building a comprehensive system in Dallas for family learning," said Sharon Darling, president and founder, NCFL. "When parents and children come together we know that we can sustain the gains that both generations make when parents begin that climb out of poverty and children start on the path for success in school."

More than 30 local nonprofit organizations have been meeting monthly since October with a goal of creating a strategic literacy plan for Dallas, focusing on adults. The organizations are part of the Literacy Coalition and are developing a shared vision that centers on equity and meaningful leadership from community members and families.

In addition, four dozen parents are enrolled in the Parent Leadership Institute. The program, which meets monthly, began in February. It focuses on building skills through service learning. Parents split into groups and tackle issues facing the community. The parents advocate, attend public meetings and talk one-on-one with elected officials. Projects include cleaning up and updating a park and bringing a grocery store into a specific part of town.

"NCFL's model is transformative for parents, children and families, as it helps people to gain skills that change the trajectory of their lives for generations to come. This is why we have helped spread NCFL all over the U.S., which now includes Dallas," said Al Smith, group vice president and chief social innovation officer, Toyota. "The NCFL Dallas collaboration is an innovative approach for the organization, closely aligned with Toyota's philosophy of sharing knowledge and collaborating to increase positive impact in key communities."

Serving under-resourced families

Of the parents participating in Toyota Family Learning, 58 percent are not employed; 61 percent of families are living on less than \$25,000 per year; and 45 percent did not graduate from high school.

These are sobering statistics in the face of research that shows the number one predictor of a child's academic success is the education of the parent, particularly the mother. Studies also show that starting school "ready to learn" is critical for students' long-term academic success, yet less than half of Texas children were not kindergarten-ready according to the Texas Education Agency's 2018 annual report.

Toyota Family Learning helps parents build workforce skills and become more confident. And, in supporting their children's education, parents help kids achieve more academic success and reduces absenteeism.

Participating parents who graduated in 2017 reported:

- 96 percent became a better parent
- 74 percent improved English skills
- 53 percent upgraded skills to keep current job
- 49 percent got a better job
- 53 percent increased income

- 36 percent obtained the knowledge necessary to pass the U.S. citizenship test
- 53 percent earned a GED certificate

Long-time partners

Toyota and NCFL have partnered for 28 years, sharing this proven family learning model with more than 420 sites in 38 states across the U.S. More than 4.5 million parents and children have been impacted by the program. To date, Toyota has invested \$50 million in NCFL.

Blanco's family participates in Toyota Family Learning at Jubilee Park & Community Center in Dallas. Toyota and NCFL have also partnered with Literacy Achieves and Voice of Hope to offer the program in other areas of town.

Blanco is already seeing the change in her 12-year-old daughter. Blanco reports she's trying harder, passing all of her classes, and thinking about applying to college, meeting her goal to improve her academic performance.

"My parents were immigrants and I just thought you were supposed to get a job and try to survive," Blanco said. "I never thought about college for my daughter. Now, she's in seventh grade and plans to go to continue her education. Where there's a will, there's a way. We will make it happen."