

# \$102,500 grant to be used for science, book programs

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Preschool children in Champaign County will have new opportunities to learn about science, and more of them will be able to participate in a book project, thanks to a new \$102,500 grant.

Champaign County Head Start will expand its activities with the help of the grant from PNC Foundation. Most of the grant money — \$90,000 — will go to Illinois Public Media over a three-year period to expand its book mentor project, which aims to help Head Start children with early-reading skills as well as get them excited about science and math.

The remaining \$12,500 goes to the William M. Staerkel Planetarium at Parkland College. The grant will

pay for a five-year license for the planetarium to present "One World, One Sky: Big Bird's Adventure." The show introduces children to the night sky and to astronomy as characters from Sesame Street take an imaginary trip to the moon.

The Head Start preschool program will also receive 585 math activity kits.

"One of the best things about this partnership of all three of us — PNC, the book mentor program that is part of Illinois Public Media, and Head Start — is that it builds on what is in our community already," said Kathleen Liffick, director of Champaign County Head Start. "The activities at the planetarium and Parkland College (are activities) families can engage in even when they have moved on from Head Start.

"This kind of community development and leveraging of what we've got ensures these are things that families can take with them after they leave from Head Start," she continued.

The grant comes through PNC's "Grow Up Great" initiative, a philanthropic program which focuses on preschool education. The program will provide \$100 million over 10 years to early childhood education.

It is in its seventh year, but this is the first year that it has included central Illinois, said Doug Stewart, PNC regional president for central Illinois. The foundation is announcing grants in Champaign-Urbana, Bloomington-Normal, Peoria, Decatur and Springfield.

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"We see this as a long-term mission to have a more prepared workforce and more contributors to society," Stewart said.

For Head Start, "It will just add to the children's learning experience," Liffick said.

The preschool program already uses the book mentor program with a little more than 100 of the 435 children it serves. Illinois Public Media applied for the PNC grant, which will allow the program to expand and serve an additional 240 children, Liffick said.

The book mentor program provides trained volunteers to visit Head Start classrooms once a month and read to the children. The children get a copy of the book to take home, and the preschool teachers lead activities that build on the content of the book. In addition to helping with reading skills, the program includes learning about science and math.

For example, when children were read a book about worms, they also used a magnifying glass to look at dirt. They first made predictions about what they might see, then talked about what they actually saw and how that compared with their predictions, Liffick said.

The program shows children that learning is fun, she said. "Exploring, discovering, using your skills — those are all things that help children to be ready for their public school experience."

Liffick said the planetarium show will be part of field trips for students and also events that families can attend. Teachers will also use books and activities in their classrooms, and they'll be provided to families, that tie in with the planetarium show.

"When we can tie in parents doing the same kind of thing with children, using the same materials or going to the same places, it solidifies it with the children and shows that what they are doing is important," Liffick said.