

High school student donates \$20,000 to help early learning efforts

Studer Community Institute

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Gorham Partington's first hint came from the pavement.

While training with his cross-country team, he noticed a schoolhouse and other splashes of color along the route he and his teammates were running. They led to signs proclaiming the audacious goal of building an Early Learning City in Pensacola.

The next hint came at Pensacola High School, where he noticed signs for the early childhood education career academy at his school. Such academies work to prepare students in high school for career fields they can either enter upon graduation or can serve them as they pursue higher education.

That's when Partington says he really keyed into what he could do to help close the "30 Million Word Gap" in his community, where only 45 percent of children are ready for kindergarten.

"Students in these academies were preparing for careers caring for young children," Partington said. "I recognized that my schoolmates would benefit from learning about the Early Learning City initiative and so would the infants and children they would soon influence."

That idea grew into Partington's capstone service project, which ended up raising nearly \$20,000 to support efforts to improve early education outcomes in our community.



Partington, an International Baccalaureate student at Pensacola High School, made early learning the focus of his capstone project. He partnered with Jordan Stein for the CAS project, which is meant to combine multiple skills of the IB learning profile, including creativity, action and service.

It included multiple aspects:

— Building on the power of parent talk and interaction. Partington wanted to weave information about the power of parent talk into the curriculum of the Escambia School District’s career academies. His project included fundraising to supply classrooms in early childhood career academies with copies of Dr. Dana Suskind’s book “Thirty Million Words: Building a Child’s Brain.”

Suskind is the founder of the TMW Center for Early Learning and Public Health at the University of Chicago. Her research team has been working to develop strategies and interventional programs to help parents understand the

power that early language and interaction has in healthy brain development and school readiness.

High school students in these academies at Escambia, Pensacola, Washington and Tate are training for jobs in the field of early childhood education.

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— Organizing the Thirty Million Words Regatta. The sailing race in collaboration with the Pensacola Yacht Club's Satori Foundation. The regatta took place in December 2018.

— Building early learning concepts into parks. Some of the funds Partington raised will sponsor Make Play Smart early learning decals in two community parks: H.K. Mathews Park on 12th Avenue and at the Fricker Center on F Street.

— Supporting SCI Brain Bags. Additional funds from Partington's project will be used to support SCI's Brain Bags, an in-hospital education tool given to parents before they leave Baptist, Sacred Heart and West Florida hospitals.

The bags, and the tools in them, are provided free of charge to the hospitals by SCI to help make sure that the estimated 5,000 children born each year in those three hospitals receive the toolkit.

Since the Brain Bag project started in mid 2017, more than 10,200 families have received the bags, and the accompanying lesson about how early talk and interaction fuels healthy brain development in the first three years of life.

That brain development is critical to building the pathways in the brain that children will need to be ready for school when they enter kindergarten.

“When we conceived the idea of the Early Learning City, we weren’t sure where it would lead,” said Shannon Nickinson, director of early learning for SCI. “Gorham’s work shows just how far and wide the idea of improving our community through a true commitment to young children — and the people who care for them — can spread.

“We are honored by his contributions not only to SCI, but also toward the School District and his fellow students. By investing in improving the skills of the people who work one-on-one everyday with young children, Gorham is improving the lives of children for generations to come.

“The ripples of what he has done could be felt in our community for generations.”

Partington said he thought every child grew up in the kind of language-rich environment he did — with parents who provided the same level of interaction as his parents, Bruce and Beth Partington.

Reading all the time and building words into everyday tasks were par for the course in the Partington household.

“At the park, my mom would interrupt playtime with my little sister and me to describe the busy squirrels or noisy airplanes overhead,” Gorham said. “My parents never tired of reading books to us or simply narrating our daily lives. I always knew that I could annoy my 2-year-old sister by hiding her copy of *The Grouchy Ladybug*, a book we read every day.”

As he learned more in the course of research for this project, he came away with an understanding of how important a rich early learning experience is — and of how special his experience had been. Partington will attend Harvard College in Cambridge, Mass., this fall.

“The more I understood about the kindergarten readiness initiative and word gap, the more I appreciated my mother and her loquacious ways,” he said. “I wanted others to uncover the remarkable power of talking to children even when they can’t talk back.”