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UM Literacy Center Takes Lead Role in Jumpstart Program

Educators look to expand pre-K reading program in Mississippi

March 12, 2015 By [Andrew Mark Abernathy](#)

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Photo by UM photographer Nathan Latil.

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi’s [Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction](#) has taken over as the lead unit for the university’s ongoing partnership with [Jumpstart](#), a national organization that helps children prepare for kindergarten by developing language and reading skills.

Jumpstart, which places college students in pre-K classrooms to work with children on basic skills, is in its third year at UM. It previously was administered through the [College of Liberal Arts](#) with training support from CELI staff. UM is the only Jumpstart partner in Mississippi, but CELI director Angela Rutherford hopes to identify new collaborators across the state.

“We hope to grow the positive impact we’re making on the lives of children,” Rutherford said. “We

know from research that the more words children can hear, speak and understand, the more they can improve their language and literacy skills. Jumpstart allows children to be actively engaged in language experiences with adults in a pre-K setting, which is essential in closing the knowledge gaps that exist in Mississippi.”

A 2014 assessment by the [Mississippi Department of Education](#) found that more than 65 percent of Mississippi children do not possess the reading skills needed for entering kindergarten. Literacy research suggests that children who enter kindergarten with quality pre-K instruction are much more likely to be proficient readers by third grade.

“Because our volunteers go in as a team at consistent times, they are able to lower the adult-to-student ratio to about 3-to-1,” said CELI literacy specialist Olivia Pasterchick, who oversees volunteers and provides training. “That’s huge, considering it’s often about 17-to-1.”

With 21 volunteers, the UM Jumpstart program has nearly doubled in size in three years and has directly affected more than 130 Mississippi children enrolled in pre-K programs in Oxford and Okolona.

“I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, but Jumpstart helped me realize that I want to specialize in early childhood,” said Sarah Howell, a first-year master’s student in elementary education who has volunteered at ABC Learning Center in Oxford and at Okolona Elementary School. “It’s a lot of work but it’s also very rewarding. The lessons are very strategic and you learn how children develop vocabulary and comprehension.”

Each Jumpstart volunteer makes an overall commitment of more than 300 hours in an academic year, which includes training, lesson preparation beforehand and professional evaluation after.

“The job requires dedication but it doesn’t feel like work once you begin developing relationships with the kids,” said Benjamin Parkman, a senior biology major from Jackson who has worked at ABC and Mary Cathey Headstart Center in Oxford. “One of my greatest aspirations in life is to be a good parent one day, and Jumpstart has given me the opportunity to build the foundation for that.”

As part of Jumpstart training, volunteers complete 40 hours of preparation before entering the classroom, including early learning knowledge assessments. UM volunteers saw nearly a 10-point jump on this assessment in 2014, Pasterchick said.

“This opportunity has a huge effect on not only the children but on the volunteers, even the ones who aren’t education majors,” Pasterchick said. “We have business and biology majors who come through this and become advocates for early childhood education because they’ve seen it work. Because of this experience, they will be better future parents and neighbors and citizens.”

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About Andrew Mark Abernathy