



DUNELAND SCHOOL CORPORATION

Birth-to-School Program:

THE EARLY LEARNING HUB

By Dr. Chip Pettit, Superintendent, Duneland School Corporation

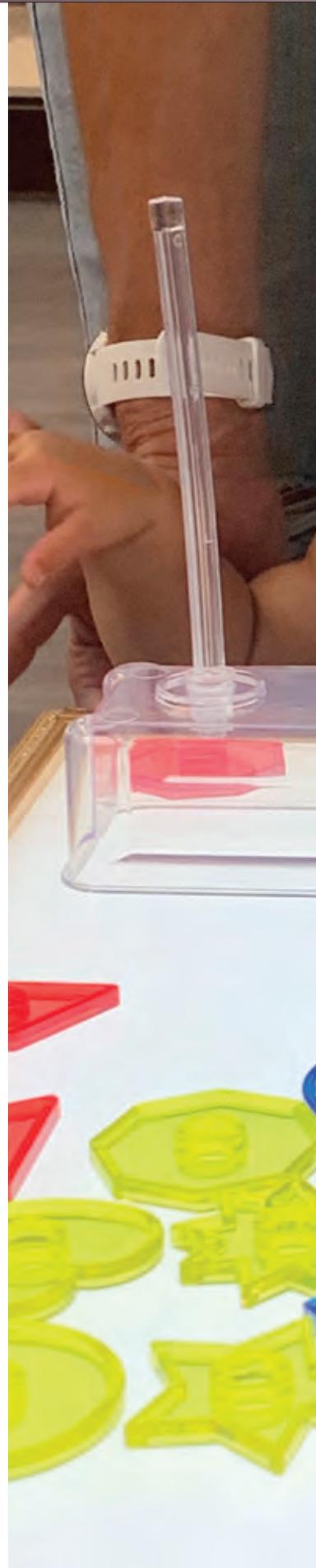


Dr. Chip Pettit
Superintendent, Duneland School Corporation

In the Spring of 2020, the Duneland School Board prioritized the development of a strategic plan to provide direction, focus, and clarity on district initiatives. A team of over 50 Duneland School Corporation (DSC) community stakeholders (board members, administration, teachers, staff, parents, students, and business owners) helped create a new four-year strategic plan that has served as a roadmap for our work together.

Now in 2023, we are well on our way to meeting our stated needs and expectations through four defined strategies outlined in the Student Achievement and Growth timeline of the DSC Strategic Plan.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first article in a year-long series featuring Duneland School Corporation.





Over the next four issues of *The Journal*, Duneland will expand on those four developing strategies:

- **Birth-to-school program (*HUB*)**
- **Consistent system for teacher collaboration - Professional Learning Communities (*PLCs*)**
- **Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum (*GVC*)**
- **Equitable academic programs for all students through multi-tiered system of support (*MTSS*)**

EARLY LEARNING HUB BIRTH-TO-SCHOOL PROGRAM

One of Duneland's most successful and growing programs is the development of the *Early Learning HUB*. Duneland recognized that learning begins at birth and early learning is critical to the future success for children. Based on research and findings during the strategic planning process, a Birth-to-School initiative was identified as a priority and an action team was created.

In January 2022, Duneland introduced the Duneland *Early Learning HUB* to the community - a hub of resources for Duneland's 0 to 5 year old children and their caregivers. The term *HUB* refers to the program's vision - **H**elp, **U**nderstand and **B**uild connections and relationships between families, educators, and the community.

The *Early Learning HUB* resides within the Duneland School Corporation Department of Teaching and Learning, led by Director Mrs. Donna Biggs. Mrs. Biggs brings knowledge and experience from her 22 years in education as a Special Education Teacher, Dean of Students and Elementary Principal. DSC Director of Grants, Assessments and

Special Programs, Mrs. Christy Jarka, provides direct leadership and support, along with co-coordinators Mrs. Amy Curtis and Mrs. Tonia Kitchel. Mrs. Jarka brings a vast amount of tools, resources, and leadership from her 25 years of experience as a classroom teacher and Elementary Principal, while Mrs. Curtis has a masters' degree in educational policy and leadership and has eight years of experience as a classroom teacher and Mrs. Kitchel has over 20 years of experience as a school psychologist, behavioral specialist, and intake coordinator in Northwest Indiana. Dr. Mary Jane Eisenhauer serves as Duneland's Early Learning Consultant,

providing guidance and resources for best practices in early childhood curriculum and family engagement. Dr. Eisenhauer brings 25 years of experience as a kindergarten teacher, researcher, early childhood teacher, educator and advocate to the *HUB*. Prior to joining the Porter County Community Foundation in 2021 as Executive Director of First Things First Porter County, she was the Associate Director for the School of Education and Counseling at Purdue Northwest and early childhood program coordinator. Dr. Eisenhauer continues to work with national, state, and local leaders to promote high quality early childhood development. Without

question, the success in the development and implementation of Duneland's *Early Learning HUB* is due to the expertise of this very talented team of professionals boasting 100 years of combined educational experience.

HUB MISSION

The mission of Duneland's *Early Learning HUB* is to empower caregivers with knowledge, resources, and opportunities for early childhood development. The goal is to create outreach opportunities that will help children and their families build relationships, access information, foster school readiness, and increase awareness



of available resources. The program assists families in preparing their children to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

The *HUB* is not a preschool where families drop their children off for childcare. Instead, it is a place for caregivers and their children to learn while playing together. The *HUB* provides district families with children ages birth - 5 with opportunities to prepare for entry into formal schooling. Thoughtful planning and attention to the community's unique needs has made the *HUB* a 'go-to resource' for Duneland families.

All classes and learning opportunities are play-based. While at the *HUB*, caregivers and children can experience play and learning based on language, socialization, early literacy and numeracy concepts, self-help and exploration and discovery opportunities. The *HUB* team provides the setting and encouragement, while caregivers get to enjoy playing and learning during this special time with their child(ren). Families can choose classes that best meet their needs.

The *HUB* also offers a wide variety of developmentally appropriate and evidence-based experiences: in-person play and learn group time (Trojan Tykes), support for parents on different topics at Play and Learn Sessions (PALS), consultation and referrals to social and educational services, and online engagement such as the *HUB* virtual series. The Virtual Trojan Series has been an effective way to engage community members, including educators, public officials, and even the high school basketball team. From birth, Duneland children are welcomed into a strong community of learners, along with their

parents/caregivers, creating a strong culture to support lifelong learning.

OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE HUB

Trojan Tykes

Trojan Tykes is a one-hour learning opportunity for caregivers and their child(ren) to come to the *HUB* and experience activities that focus on literacy, play, socialization, language, and self-help skills. Families experience story and circle time, interactive center activities, and opportunities to connect with other families and children. The *HUB* coordinators guide the Tykes hour, and caregivers are in control as they learn alongside their children in fun and engaging ways. All children receive a book at the end of each session to encourage literacy development and help families build their home libraries.

Play and Learn Sessions (PALS)

PALS is a series of education events where caregivers, professionals, and community members can come together to discuss, learn, share, and question common and current early childhood topics. PALS is designed for caregivers who reside within the Duneland School Corporation boundaries and have one or more children who have not yet started school (under age 6). Expectant families are also welcome. Caregivers may include parents, grandparents, other family members, foster families, guardians, etc. Children may attend with caregivers, as appropriate activities and supervision are provided so that caregivers can attend to the information. PALS events will also be offered to Chesterton-based child care providers in the future, with topics developed specific to child care settings.

Trojans Together

Trojans Together is a quarterly evening event designed to build rapport with the community and engage families. Caregivers and their children come together to experience the *HUB* through child and caregiver led play, activities, and family engagement opportunities. Examples include Dudes at the *HUB*, Back to School, Community Partners, Library Read-In, and Winter Wonderland.

Trojan Time

On Fridays, the *Early Learning HUB* is open for families to explore and play for up to 90 minutes. The *HUB* co-coordinators are available for engagement and providing resources.

On-Demand Opportunities

Resources and interactive activities for families, such as the *HUB* Virtual Trojan Series, can be accessed 24:7 on the Duneland *Early Learning HUB* website (duneland.k12.in.us/earlylearninghub). Participants can also follow Duneland *Early Learning HUB* on Facebook and Instagram to see activities in action. Families are encouraged to join Duneland Early Learning on Remind to chat with the coordinators and receive reminders about opportunities and events.

Community Partnerships

During the first year of creating, building, and implementing the program, *HUB* co-coordinators engaged in intentional outreach efforts to generate support for the *HUB* initiatives. They attended events, held in-person and virtual meetings, shared information, and participated in media interviews. This thoughtful and purposeful planning time resulted in two kickoff events and

a full semester of successful activities for Duneland young children and families. The VIP Community Kickoff was attended by a variety of stakeholders invested in supporting the *HUB*. Support and enthusiasm for the *HUB* is evident in the continued requests from the community for meetings, tours of the *HUB*, information, and media appearances/interviews. Partnerships with several local providers and organizations are established and evolving to best meet the needs of young children and their families in the Duneland community. These community partnerships have been an integral component of the formation

and continued growth of the *HUB*. The network of resources within the community include, but are not limited to, preschools, universities, pediatricians, therapy programs, the Duneland Family YMCA, Porter County Education Foundation, Kidworks LLC, Geminus Head Start, DSC Kindergarten Team, and many more.

One unanticipated source of reciprocity and support is taking shape with the DSC Alternative School. High schoolers attending the Alternative School have been engaged in a variety of ways, including assembling classroom materials, assisting with projects, and

serving as unofficial ambassadors because of their proximity to the *HUB*. Additionally, the *HUB* has provided resources and information to the teens about health and wellness.

In collaboration with Parents As Teachers of Porter County, Duneland Schools offers the 'Ready, Set, Kindergarten' program to children who will enter kindergarten the following school year. This free program for ages 4-5 is available one day a week at each of the district's elementary schools. Together with the Porter County Education Service Center, the district has Developmental Preschool and Preschool Speech available for children ages three to Kindergarten with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The developmental preschool program is housed at two of the district's elementary schools. Preschool Speech, available at all the Duneland elementary schools, allows families to bring their children to one of the elementary schools for speech services.

One of the initiatives that the *HUB* is most proud of is the book giveaway. Funds were budgeted to provide each child participant with a high quality, age appropriate book after each Trojan Tykes class. This has been done with the goal of encouraging early literacy, language rich environments, and helping families build their at-home libraries. During the 2021-2022 school year, 233 books were distributed to each child for a value of almost \$1500. Grant funding received through the Duneland Education Foundation (DEF) helps to maintain the book giveaway and provides for the purchase of snacks and learning materials at the *Early Learning HUB*.

Because early childhood development affects every aspect of our community, the

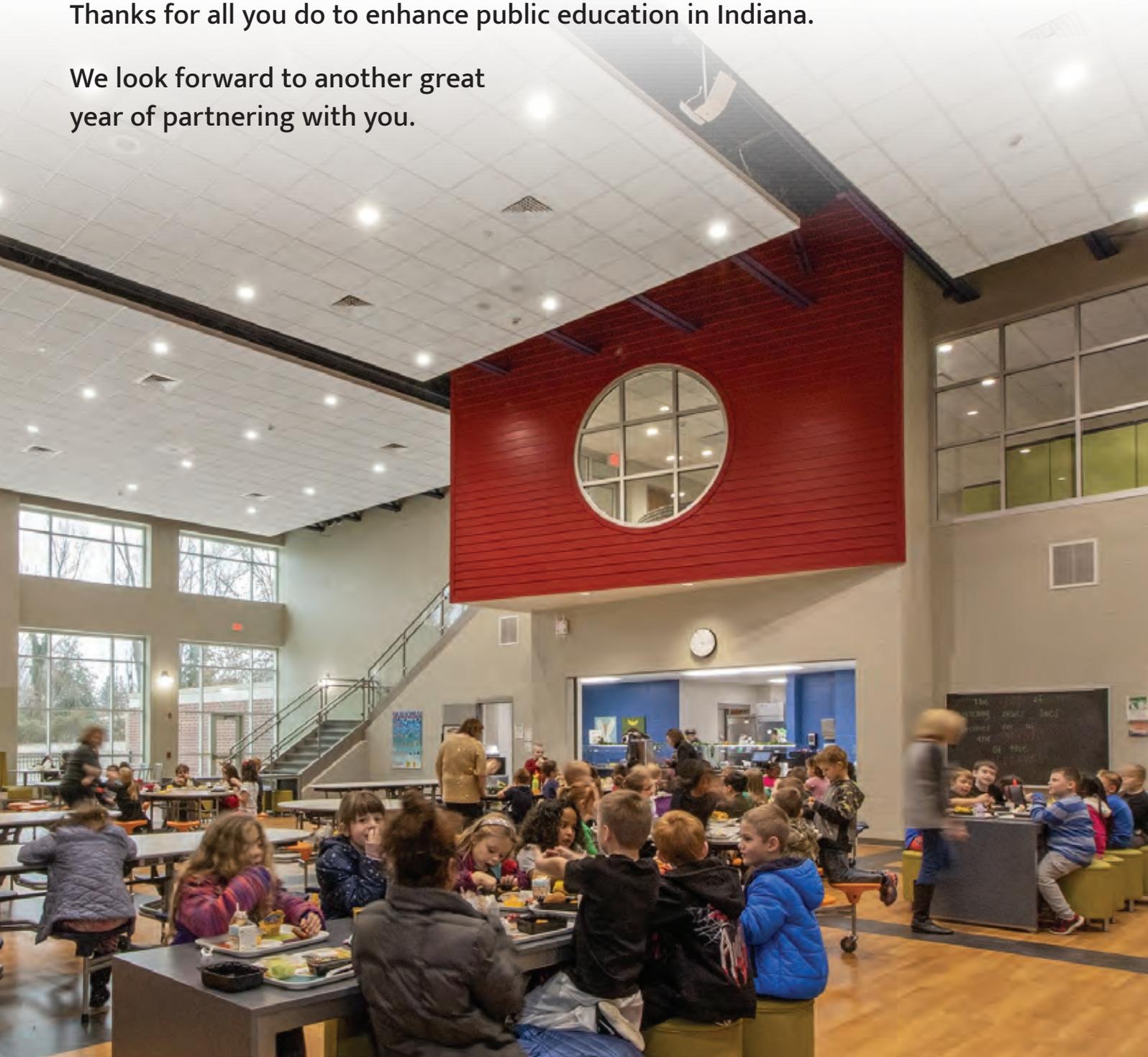


HUB co-coordinator Amy Curtis teaching a Trojan Tykes class.

Thanks for all you do.

As we kick off 2023, we're celebrating School Boards, Administrators, and Staff. Thanks for all you do to enhance public education in Indiana.

We look forward to another great year of partnering with you.



Porter County Community Foundation launched First Things First Porter County in 2021 to strengthen, sustain, and nurture partnerships to promote Healthy Beginnings, Supported Families and High Quality Early Experiences. Facilitated by Dr. Eisenhauer, First Things First acts as the convener to promote collaboration and innovation. The future of Porter County's youngest citizens, the quality of life for all residents, and the economic health of the community will be impacted by this ambitious endeavor. The *HUB* was among 30 organizations who participated in Camp Collaboration, the First Things First Porter County resource fair for early care and learning agencies, providers, and practitioners. The *HUB* was able to make connections with numerous programs and services to further support DSC families.

FUNDING

Funding for Preschool Speech and Developmental Preschool is part of DSC's cooperative partnership with Porter County Education Services. For the Developmental Preschool Program, there is a nominal fee charged to families. The fees are used to pay for consumables to support classroom activities and curriculum. ESSER III dollars were allocated to fund the current structure of the early learning initiatives such as Parents-As-Teachers (Ready Set Kindergarten) and the *HUB*. The funds allowed Duneland School Corporation the opportunity to create and build the program. When funding from ESSER III is no longer available, DSC intends to utilize Education fund and Operating fund referendum dollars to sustain early

learning programs within the corporation. In addition, DSC will continue to develop partnerships with community organizations and foundations and will participate in other grant opportunities to seek additional funding to support these early learning programs.

COMING SOON

The Duneland School Corporation has a lot to celebrate when it comes to the establishment of the *Early Learning HUB*. Of note are the relationships the *HUB* has built with our future K-12 Trojans; their families; and Duneland's local community organizations, businesses, and agencies. People are interested in what the Duneland School Corporation is doing. They want to learn more about the *HUB*, what they can do to participate, and how



Left to right, Duneland Early Learning HUB Co-coordinator Tonia Kitchel; Duneland Education Foundation Executive Director Amy Redman; DSC Director of Grants, Assessments and Special Programs Christy Jarka; and HUB Co-coordinator Amy Curtis.

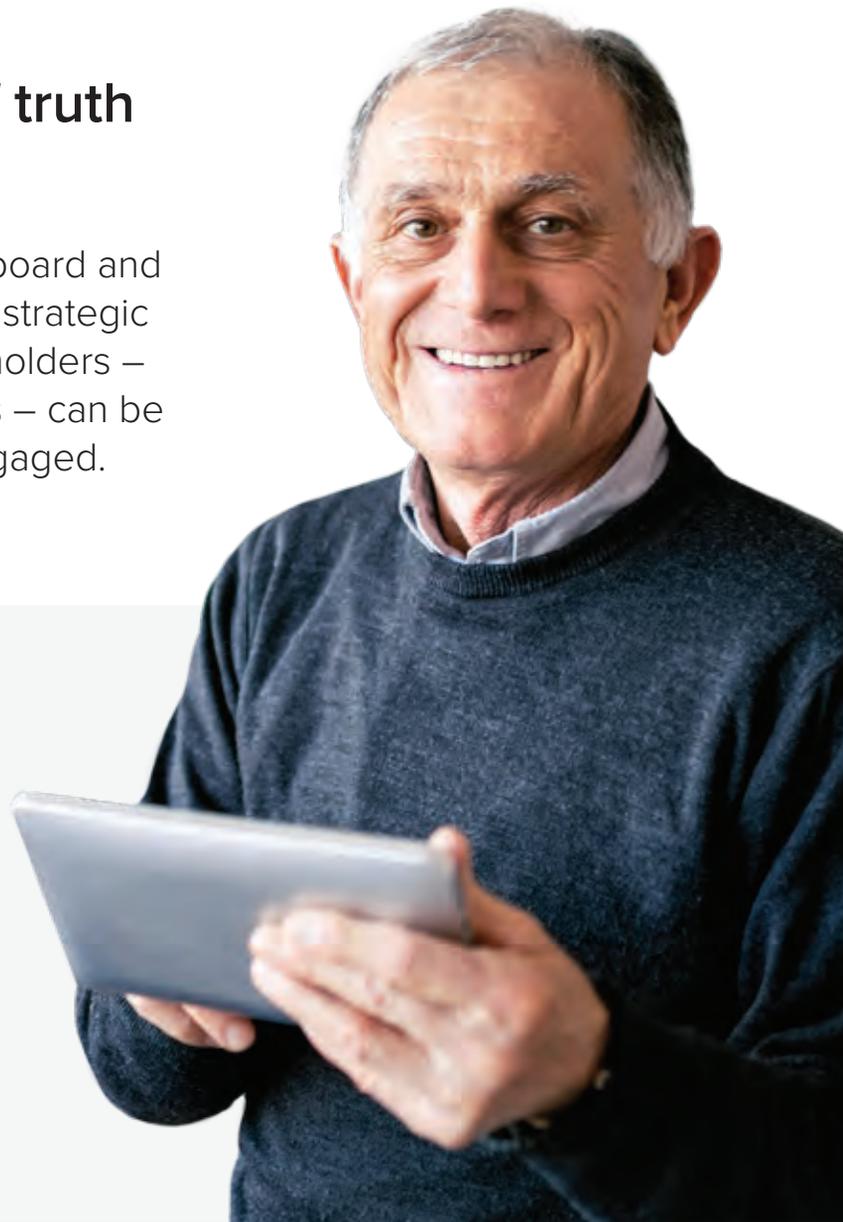
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Moving forward, the DSC *Early Learning HUB* will continue to expand on early learning opportunities within the community. The team will collaborate with the Department of Teaching and Learning leadership, elementary school administrators, and kindergarten teachers to increase awareness of early learning. They will continue to work in conjunction with community partners to broaden the early childhood opportunities in the Duneland School area. For example, DSC's endeavor with First Things First

Porter County and Too Small to Fail Foundation is part of the Talking is Teaching campaign. Porter County is the first community in Indiana to host this national campaign, and DSC's *HUB* has become an official member of the Talking is Teaching community, a public awareness and action campaign that aims to motivate parents and caregivers to talk, read, and sing more with their young children from birth. With the help of Talking is Teaching, the *HUB* will take part in spreading a consistent message across the community and will help

empower families to talk, read, and sing with their 0-5 year old children every day.

It is a priority of the Duneland schools to support the local community, as well as inspire the state of Indiana to create more comprehensive early childhood learning opportunities for 0-5 year olds and their families, as well as develop a more robust field of early childhood educators. There is a shortage of highly-qualified professionals who are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to meet the developmental needs of young children. In an effort to expand the talent pipeline for the profession, the DSC *Early Learning HUB* will strengthen its relationships with their school partners, by hosting senior interns from the Chesterton High School (CHS) Internship Program, being guest speakers for CHS Family and Consumer Sciences Department, and welcoming Porter County high school Career and Technical Education students into the *HUB* to experience a class. Intentional engagement with high school students interested in pursuing a career in early education benefits the students as well as *HUB* programming, children and families, and the community.

In just under two years, Duneland has successfully launched a birth-to-school initiative. The demand for classes continues to exceed what was anticipated based on enrollment data. The *HUB* will continue to develop creative ways to meet the demands and interest of the community, while making the *HUB* accessible to all families. Duneland is fortunate to have a School Board that is committed to providing direction and support in this critical area and a very talented team of educators working together to build this program. 🏠