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## St. Lucie County schools celebrate opening of Parent Academy, Early Childhood Initiative

By Kelly Tyko

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PORT ST. LUCIE — More than 400 local and state community, business, education and government leaders came together Thursday to make a statement.

Children matter. Families matter. Because how children and family navigate life defines community.

"Let us commit to breaking down the barriers that divide us and let us begin to unite our efforts in a cause to transform St. Lucie County for our children today and generations to come," Associate Superintendent Owen Roberts said.

St. Lucie County School District officials unveiled the Parent Academy of St. Lucie County and its Early Childhood Initiative at an invitation-only event Thursday at the Port St. Lucie Civic Center. The two programs are two of the four focuses in the school district's five-year partnership with the world's largest educational publisher, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Florida Department of Education Chancellor Pam Stewart and Melody Jurado, director of Florida's Office of Early Learning, attended Thursday's event and brought congratulations from Tallahassee.

Florida Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson couldn't attend the event, but sent a video message.

Robinson congratulated St. Lucie on its gains in student achievement over the last five years and said the district's partnership with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt "is the kind of public-private partnership that is vitally important for Florida."

It's because of the partnership that St. Lucie is able to increase resources in the classrooms in a time of tight budgets.

"Today we make history as we publicly kick off our partnership with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, the world's largest publisher of educational materials," St. Lucie County Schools Superintendent Michael Lannon said, describing the Parent Academy and the early childhood initiative. "Both these major stems of the partnership are not using any taxpayer dollars, HMMH is investing nearly \$11 million in and for the people of St. Lucie County and much of that will now fund these two culture-changing initiatives."

The St. Lucie County School Board approved the conceptual idea for the partnership in December 2010 and gave final approval to an agreement with the publishing company in March 2011. In the partnership, which continues through June 2016, the district will spend \$12.4 million on textbooks and instructional materials from the company and the company will provide the district with about \$11.3 million in extra goods and services.

The publisher is helping the district by providing training to teachers, classroom materials and financial support, such as discounts on textbooks and technology.

The partnership's other focuses are the development of a comprehensive science, technology, engineering and mathematics curriculum; and attacking the digital divide, which is the gap between people with access to digital and information technology and those with limited or no access.

Lannon said educators across the nation and around the world are "looking to St. Lucie for answers to 21st century issues."

"Through this partnership, St. Lucie County today stands alone in the nation, with the ability of providing for that more perfect union of our residents that does provide for justice and tranquility, does ensure tranquility through increased opportunities for all, especially for our children," Lannon said.

Motivational speaker Adolph Brown III was the keynote speaker Thursday and brought home the message of the importance parents and adult role models play in a child's life.

"If they flunk life, then we've failed them," said Brown, who addresses Fortune 500 companies, offers workshops and seminars and has published books, DVDs and CDs.

Brown also congratulated St. Lucie for its initiatives.

"There's no place doing exactly what you're doing," Brown said. "In Connecticut, they have parent centers. In Syracuse they have a whole lot of research on parent engagement. ... They don't come close to doing what you are about to embark on."



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