

CORPORATE GRANTS

Consumers providing \$220K for education

By Tarryl Jackson

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Consumers Energy has awarded \$220,000 to early childhood education and community programs that help Jackson County children and their families.

The money will support programs that provide free books to preschoolers, mentoring and child-care payment assistance, the Jackson-based company announced today.

Dave Mengebier, president of the Consumers Energy Foundation, said there is a tremendous need for early education programs in the community.

"It's an investment in our children, (and) it's an investment in our economy," he said. "This is an area that the company wants to focus its charitable giving in."

Last year, the company provided \$195,000 in grants for early childhood programs.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm launched Project Great Start in her 2005 State of the State address, with the idea that education begins at birth, rather than when a child enters school.

Early childhood programs will help some children avoid having to do remedial work in the future, said Carolyn Bloodworth, director of corporate giving at Consumers Energy.

"It's a good use of our resources," she said. "It puts everyone on the same path."

The Great Start Collaborative of Jackson County will receive \$110,000 for parent education, data assessment to measure the effectiveness of early childhood programs and its Imagination Library program.

"It's very encouraging that every year they come back with a new commitment," said Sheri Butters, the collaborative's director. "It shows they believe in what we're doing."

Currently, about 3,500 children are enrolled in Imagination Library, which provides one free book per month to children from birth to age 5. More than 45,000 books have been given to families

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through the program, which was started in May 2008, Butters said. "All of these things wouldn't have happened without Consumers' support," Butters said.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Jackson County, which provides mentoring programs for area youth, will receive \$50,000.

Executive Director Erica Vogel said more than 40 Consumers Energy employees and retirees are mentors in the programs.

At the end of March, the agency had 173 active matches, up from 99 at the end of 2008.

"We couldn't do that without partners like Consumers Energy," Vogel said. "It's a welcomed and appreciated partnership."

Child Care Network will receive \$60,000 for child care scholarships in Jackson County.

Consumers Energy awarded \$35,000 to the Hillsdale County Great Start Collaborative for its Imagination Library program and child-care scholarships.

The company also awarded \$75,000 to early childhood programs in Lenawee, Ingham and Tuscola counties and the Traverse Bay/Manistee area.