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[Project Read feels budget ax](#)

- Emily Wilson, Special to The Chronicle
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Jeanine Asche, San Mateo County's literacy coordinator, is proud of how the county has tried to improve early childhood literacy. But some fear that Asche's latest strategy will make it harder for adults to learn to read - - and could harm some of the children she is trying to help.



Next month, Asche will cut about \$46,000 from Project Read, which focuses on adult literacy, and use the money to hire a coordinator for the early childhood program.

"There's been a lot of new research on brain development and the role of reading, and how important it is to reach children at an early age, before they're in school," Asche said. "My ideal is that we work with children and families today to make sure we have adults tomorrow that read well."

As for Project Read, she believes the move will be a case of streamlining -- not slashing.

Here's why: Besides operating its own Project Read program, the county has been paying \$46,000 to similar programs run by city-operated libraries in San Mateo and South San Francisco. For the money, those two libraries have helped residents in many neighboring communities, including Pacifica, San Bruno, Foster City and San Carlos.

Starting next month, however, newcomers to the county program will have to sign up at one of the two county-run sites, which are in East Palo Alto and Half Moon Bay. They will learn through that program rather than those in San Mateo and South San Francisco.

Holly Fulghum-Nutters, director of South San Francisco's Project Read, is concerned about what the shift will mean. She said about one in five adults in San Mateo County reads English at a third- or fourth-grade level, meaning they would have a hard time reading a letter or newspaper, sending an e-mail or helping children with homework.

"Adult literacy is one of the hardest things to fund, and for children's literacy it's pretty easy," she said. "We have dull old adults; she has sexy numbers and cute little kids."

Both Fulghum-Nutters and Valerie Sommer, the library director in South San Francisco, are concerned about what will happen to some students during the transition.

"It's quite a learning curve to step back and say there is this new program," Sommer said. "It's a real heartache for us to start turning people away."

Redwood City and Menlo Park run their own Project Read program, so their residents won't be affected by the cuts. Neither will people in Daly City and Burlingame because their cities pay for services through South San Francisco and San Mateo, respectively.

Amy Prevedel, the director of the Berkeley library literacy program, is co-chair of BALit, the literacy association for the Bay Area. Prevedel, who used to work at the South San Francisco Project Read, says she hates to see good programs compete with each other.

"There are 25 library-based literacy programs in the Bay Area that serve 6,000 people every year," Prevedel said. "If you think about who those adults are, they're our neighbors, our co-workers -- and they're parents. By teaching adults, you have all this impact on the social structure."

Prevedel says the programs Asche has started, such as Raising a Reader, a program in 450 preschools that gives children books to take home, are wonderful. But she says those kids need to have somebody at home to read to them.

"Many of us have a cozy picture of an adult reading a book to a child, but maybe that's not what literacy looks like in that household. If parents struggle with their own skills, reading with their kids might not be a fun or comfortable experience," Prevedel said. "It's all the rage to say we will leave no child behind, but if we leave parents and adults behind, what does that say?"

Asche says adults will not be left behind, but will be better served by getting other library staff members involved -- not just the people at Project Read.

The director of the county library system, Jannette Engel, explained that Project Read will be incorporated within the overall library system, rather than being considered a separate program. So a San Carlos resident who wants to learn to read or write better, for example, might tell a staff member at the San Carlos Library, then the staffer would do the intake paperwork and contact the county program in East Palo Alto.

Someone from East Palo Alto would go to San Carlos, do an assessment and try and match the person with a tutor. The East Palo Alto and Half Moon Bay programs will also train Project Read tutors.

The libraries and the Project Read staff in East Palo Alto won't be getting additional employees, Engel said.

"The money isn't there for any extra staff," Engel said. "We need to restructure and be creative. That challenge is there for every public worker. Unfortunately, we don't get our money based on our workloads."

Some people who work in literacy don't think it makes sense to have potential students go into a library to tell someone they have a hard time reading.

"A library might not be the first place a person hangs out who has always struggled with reading," Prevedel said. "There's a real link between low literacy and shame and hiding. It's critical our programs be free and confidential so an adult learner knows they won't be exposed."

Pacifica resident and Project Read student Mary Ann Gonzalez says she doesn't think she would join the program today if she had to talk to someone behind a library desk.

"It was hard to even tell the lady I wanted a flyer," she said. "I probably would walk out and lose my chance to read and write."

Three years after joining the program, Gonzalez, who owns her own housecleaning business, says her life has changed.

"I'm reading books now," Gonzalez said. "I'm on my fifth book and my writing is a lot better. I'm able to leave notes they can understand at work now, and it's built up my self-confidence a lot."

Another Pacifica resident, Ray Lopez, doesn't like the idea of the library staff making the first contact.

"If I was a new learner, I don't even think I'd go in the library because it's not really personal," he said. "At that point, you're not ready to let the whole world know you have a problem."

Lopez started in the program more than 10 years ago and has advanced in his job at Meals on Wheels to supervising volunteers. Lopez, who signed up after his granddaughter corrected him while he was reading her a story, said contacting Project Read wasn't easy.

"I don't think they realize how hard that first step is when you finally admit you have a problem and actually ask for help," he said.

The program director for Project Read in East Palo Alto, Joan Sykes- Miessi, says she does understand. But she thinks her program, with the help of city library staff, will be able to do a good job working with new students, and the staff is making a big push to find people and to make them feel welcome.

She and Engel say people need to accept the reality that children's literacy is more appealing now to the people who hand out grants.

"Funders are much more willing to support children than they are adults," Sykes-Miessi said. "Prevention is so much less expensive than intervention. I don't feel like it's becoming a children's literacy program. I think it makes sense to put it all under one umbrella. ... Those children are tied to adults so we still need to serve those adults."

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