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## **For Immediate Release**

### ***MCHD WIC book vending machine “helps us access books we wouldn’t have known about otherwise”***

**MORGANTOWN, WV (Aug. 31, 2022)** — Holding her nearly 2-year-old son, Orion, Amy Gibb allows him to place a token in the slot of the new book vending machine at Monongalia County Health Department’s WIC building. Then he points to a title – or maybe it was the cover illustration that caught his eye.

Out pops “The Summer Nick Taught His Cats to Read,” an appropriate choice considering how important books are to Gibb and Orion.

“In the past few months, he’s really become fascinated by stories,” said Gibb, of Morgantown. “He brings us the same books over and over again. It’s really helpful to initiate conversation as we work on his verbal skills. It’s really helped his vocabulary.”

Gibb, who has always been a bookworm herself, is thrilled that Orion has another source of reading material.

And Cami Haight, manager of MCHD WIC, is happy that the federally-funded nutrition program has offerings for participants that help feed the mind as well as the belly.

“Honestly, I think both the kids and the parents are excited to see it,” she said of the vending machine, which is located in the entryway of the MCHD WIC building on Elmer Prince Drive. “They say, ‘That’s really cool.’ And the kids are excited to push the button and get the book out of the vending machine.”

Three book vending machines – part of a program called “Born to Achieve-I CAN READ – are components of an early literacy pilot project facilitated by a \$50,000 Sparking Early Literacy Grant and sponsored by the West Virginia Public Education Collaborative (WVPEC) in conjunction with the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.

Matching funds were offered from private donors to purchase book vending machines. In addition to MCHD WIC, the other two are located at the Wood County WIC and the WVU Medicine Pediatric and Adolescent Care office at the University Town Center.

Each machine holds 200 books – 20 titles and 10 copies of each, said Melissa Workman, director of the WVU Child Development Laboratory School, one of the collaborating agencies that helps select titles for the machines.

“The reaction is heartwarming, empowering and exciting,” Workman said. “WIC counselors report that children and families are very excited to come in for visits because the child receives a coin to select a book from the vending machine. Having the opportunity to select a book is very empowering and motivating to young children.”

According to information on the website of Reach Out & Read, a non-profit organization that also provides literacy training, “Children that are read to more often have improved language and listening skills, experience stronger emotional connections to their loved ones and gain a lifelong love of reading.”

Furthermore, the National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has released information stating that children with socio-economic disadvantages often do not have exposure to the reading and vocabulary that develops early learning and cognitive skills, with 61% possessing no children’s books at home.

Workman noted that the goal of the literacy project is to improve school readiness for children from birth to the age of 5. Research shows, she added, that children who enter school with greater expressive and receptive vocabularies can be more successful when taking formal literary instruction from pre-K through third grade.

“By pre-K, if their parents or caregivers are reading to them and talking to them about the content, they can enter school with a vocabulary more like their peers,” she added. “Our approach is school readiness.”

The vending machine selections come from Scholastic Books, and each features a QR code that offers a complementary STEAM challenge, promoting science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

“For example, in “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” the goats are going over the bridge to get away from the troll under the bridge,” Workman said. “So the STEAM challenge would be to use materials around the house to create a bridge that would help them get from one side to the other without being scared by the troll. There is a problem and a solution.”

Brittany Taylor of Morgantown, an MCHD WIC participant with her 2-year-old daughter, Aaliyah Mayle, also appreciates the book vending machine.

“I thought it was a great idea,” she said. “Aaliyah loves books. We read almost every day.”

Like Orion Gibb and his mother, Taylor and Aaliyah also get a new book every month from the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which distributes free books to children monthly until the age of 5.

“We have created our own book collection,” Gibb added. “Free books have been amazing. It’s really grown our collection and helps us access books we wouldn’t have known about otherwise.”

Among other healthy habits, books have helped Orion learn song lyrics and it's become a vital part of his bedtime routine, up there with brushing his teeth. "It helps him get settled so his mind is active, but he knows we're headed toward some sleep," Gibb said. "Or it's a good way to start the day."

The federal Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program provides nutrition counseling, nutrition packages and breastfeeding support to pregnant and postpartum women and their children up to their fifth birthday who qualify through generous income guidelines. Foster children automatically qualify, as do children being raised by guardians who qualify. MCHD WIC operates in six counties: Monongalia, Preston, Marion, Harrison, Doddridge and Taylor. The book vending machine is located at MCHD WIC in Monongalia County. "We have always given away books at WIC, but the book vending machine gives children the freedom to choose," said MCHD WIC nutritionist Sierra Rosales. "I love seeing the look on the children's faces when they grab their books out of the bottom of the machine." Because of the pandemic, MCHD WIC still sees some clients remotely, but many have started to return for in-person counseling and an exam for the child. "I hope the vending machine leaves a positive impression with our families and encourages them to return more often," Rosales said.

*For up-to-date information on health and wellness in Monongalia County, check out [monchd.org](http://monchd.org) and follow the health department on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at #wvmchd.*