

Heart of a Lion



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NewsRelease

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PERSHING ELEMENTARY'S NEW BELIEVE PROJECT LITERACY LAB OPENS TO STUDENTS ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 15

UNIVERSITY CITY, Mo. - Starting next Monday, November 15, students at Pershing Elementary School will have a room where they can relax and explore more than 1,000 culturally responsive books, art and technology. The room - a literacy lab - is part of the Believe Project, an initiative of St. Louis Black Authors of Children's Literature, a non-profit led by Julius B. Anthony.

Media are invited to visit with the students at Pershing Elementary School on Monday, November 15 from 9:15 to 10:45 a.m. when groups of students first enter the new literacy lab and begin exploring the books on their own. An RSVP is required by emailing communications@ucityschools.org. Facial masks will be required. Anthony and district representatives will be available for interviews.

The Believe Project's objective is to improve reading proficiency for students, especially those in kindergarten through third grade. Research shows that if students aren't strong readers by third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of school. Literacy labs are different from most school libraries. They're spaces where students see themselves and their lives reflected in the books that fill the shelves. The rooms are decorated with bright chairs and pillows, a wall mural and other touches to make them feel like a home. Students in grades K-3 will spend 90 minutes a week in the lab, and will have the freedom to explore the room however they choose. Anthony, founder of The Believe Project, refers to students who use the labs as Believers.

"One of the Believers said during his first experience in the literacy lab, 'Wow, this is the first time I've seen hundreds of books with pictures in them that look like me!'" Anthony said. "I believe for that child and hundreds more, it could be the first step toward cultivating reading interests, confidence, and pure joy."

The Believe Project aligns with values and strategic priorities of both The School District of University City and The Opportunity Trust, the primary funder, by uplifting Black and Brown children and going outside of the traditional school model to improve literacy. Superintendent Sharonica Hardin-Bartley said meaningful partnerships like this add value to University City schools.

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“Literacy is a tool of liberation,” Hardin-Bartley said. “The literacy lab will help our students aspire for a future with amazing opportunities while also experiencing the joy of reading, which they will have for the rest of their lives.”

“Research is unequivocal that children need high quality literature in which they see themselves,” said Eric Scroggins, founder and CEO of The Opportunity Trust. “I’m excited that children at Pershing will have their own literacy lab to get lost in books they love as they discover the joys of reading. The Believe Project is an innovative way to improve literacy and access.”

The new lab demonstrates the innovative approach to learning at Pershing. In July 2020, Deitra Colquitt and Jessica Hawkins began leading the school as co-principals, a model that embraces the District’s focus on a human-centered approach to leadership. The Believe Project aligns with the three pillars of the District’s vision of Learning Reimagined: Humanize, Personalize and Problematize.

This will be the sixth literacy lab that the Believe Project has opened in the St. Louis region.

The Opportunity Trust provided a \$34,500 grant to cover the cost of transforming the room and teacher training. Other contributors and supporters are: Nine PBS, Ready Readers, the Noble Neighbor, the Missouri History Museum, Turn the Page STL, and St. Louis Regional Literacy Association.

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