



Rocky Wilson/Chieftain

A man integral to a national effort to increase rates of third-grade reading proficiency, Ralph Smith of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, of Baltimore, was in Enterprise Aug. 5 to commend Building Healthy Families for a program it drafted along those lines.

Building Healthy Families strikes third grade gold

By Rocky Wilson
Wallowa County Chieftain

An innovative education program drafted by Building Healthy Families (BHF), of Enterprise, and others from the community has achieved national acclaim.

In town Monday, Aug. 5, from Baltimore, Md., to acknowledge that feat was Ralph Smith, senior vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Smith said BHF's submission about improving reading skills at the third grade level was "one of the strongest in the country" from among 124 submissions made to his foundation.

"Research is really solid that third grade reading skill is one of the strongest predictors of high school graduation," Smith said.

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Launched in 1948 by Jim Casey – the man who earned a fortune by beginning what's now United Parcel Service – and Casey's family, the Annie E. Casey Foundation strives to support human-service reforms and community supports that meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

Building Healthy Families here launched on a similar, independent platform in 1999.

The cornerstones of BHF's submitted program, as presented by BHF staff members and reiterated by Smith are school attendance, summer learning, and school readiness.

For several years BHF, which employs a total of 18 people headed by Executive Director Amy Johnson, actively has sought to improve the health of local families and children.

After-school and summer programs are included in what the 14-year-old non-profit does. Although sum-

mer reading programs are highly regarded, Johnson and staff are quick to acknowledge bonuses provided to children by other community activities, not the least being 4-H programs and events.

Smith says school readiness "is a way of thinking, a way of working" that starts with prenatal care and healthy births. A former law professor for more than 20 years at the University of Pennsylvania, Smith embarked in 2010 with the Annie E. Casey Foundation

to combat the sad fact that 80 percent of children from low-income families fall short of third grade reading efficiency, hence limiting their chances of graduating from high school.

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Smith manages for the Casey Foundation does not issue grants, Smith says.

When the campaign launched in 2010, two governors from among 50 were in attendance, Smith said. One of the two was Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber.