



MARC-YVES REGIS / THE HARTFORD COURANT

REAKOWN JENKINS, left, and Samantha Williams, both 4, show each other the books they selected Tuesday morning at the Community Renewal Team's T.D. Ritter Head Start Center. The program was funded by a \$15,000 grant from Reading Is Fundamental. More than 100 children received a book at the center. A total of 1,400 books were given away in Hartford, surrounding towns and Middlesex County. The grant will allow the centers to sponsor another book giveaway in November.

# Grant Provides Children With Free Books

## Gift From National Reading Program Benefits Head Start

By SUSAN KANIA  
SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

The excitement was almost too much for the 3- and 4-year-olds. Should they choose a book about Curious

### IN HARTFORD'S NEIGHBORHOODS

George, Clifford the Big Red Dog, the monsters in "Where the Wild Things Are," or the yellow school bus?

On Tuesday, a room at the Community Renewal Team's T.D. Ritter Head Start Center became a bookstore for the children. Through a grant from Reading Is Fundamental, more than 100 preschoolers at the Ritter Center each selected one new book to take home and share with their families. For many of the children, it was the first book they've ever owned.

The children at CRT's Head Start centers in Hartford, surrounding towns and Middlesex County also held celebrations, giving out a total of 1,400 books. Parents and

community volunteers joined in by reading to the children in their classrooms.

Dongean Bowers, 3, chose a Cheerios Counting Book at first, but when he spotted one about basketball, he changed his mind. "This is all mine," he said as he sat on the floor and hugged his new book.

Kira Robertson, 3, browsed for a few minutes before she chose "Thomas' Busy Day." She said she has another book about Thomas the Tank Engine at home that she reads with her mom and sister, along with her favorite Barbie book.

Kira's mom, Alba Rivera, 28, who volunteers at the Ritter Center every day, said she frequently reads to her two children, and they have many books at home that she ordered from a catalog. "The more they read, the quicker they learn," Rivera said.

"Una Monita Crece," a book written in Spanish about a monkey, was 4-year-old Ricardo Figueroa's choice. His teacher said he recognized the words in Spanish and insisted that was the book for him.

Debbie Cawley, CRT's literacy manager, said CRT's Early Childhood and Education Head Start Centers have joined other Head Start Centers across the nation in an increased emphasis on early childhood literacy supported by President Bush.

"We want parents to know that children who are read to are better students, better writers and they think

more creatively," Cawley said. "Research shows that children should have 1,000 books read to them by the age of 6."

In addition to reading to their children for at least 15 minutes each night, parents are encouraged to visit the library and take advantage of the many programs offered there, Cawley said. Through the \$15,000 Reading Is Fundamental grant, CRT's Head Start centers will be able to sponsor another book giveaway in November. Each Head Start classroom will also be stocked with a selection of new multicultural books to start their own lending libraries this fall.

After Head Start teacher Marilyn Alicea's class selected their books at the Ritter Center, they gathered around her on the classroom rug. They talked a little about authors and illustrators, then she read them a book called "The Right Number of Elephants." As they listened to the words, the children followed her lead, counting, painting with pretend paintbrushes in the air and forming make-believe sunglasses with their fingers when they got to the part about the beach.

"We read a lot of books here, and we also teach the children how to take care of them," Alicea said. "The book giveaway is a great opportunity for parents to help promote literacy."

For more information about CRT's Head Start centers, call 860-560-5565.