

Lowell-Jefferson-Webster neighborhood gets fed grant

By George Hostetter / The Fresno Bee

Community leaders gathered Thursday morning at Fresno City Hall to celebrate a large federal grant designed to help some of the city's most impoverished neighborhoods.

The U.S. Department of Education has awarded a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant to Reading and Beyond, a local nonprofit that helps children and families lead productive lives.

The grant, estimated to be just under \$500,000, will enable Reading and Beyond to develop a 10-year plan to break the cycle of poverty in the Lowell-Jefferson-Webster neighborhood north of downtown. The neighborhoods draw their name from the Fresno Unified elementary schools that serve the area.



Reading and Beyond will work with more than 40 government agencies, nonprofits, foundations and educational institutions in creating the plan. Reading and Beyond will then apply to the Department of Education for money to start the plan.

Don't let the fog outside City Hall fool you, said Reading and Beyond executive director Luis Santana at the news conference. "This is a bright day for Fresno."

Mayor Ashley Swearingin said widespread collaborative efforts are making progress in eliminating high concentrations of poverty in Fresno. The grant, Swearingin said, "is a sign of something powerful that is happening in our community."

Reading and Beyond and its partners will determine what kind of help the neighborhoods need. That will lead to a blueprint for improving educational opportunities, bringing more support to families and tracking the success of children.

Among the goals:

- Ensure that children enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- Make sure that teens graduate from high school.
- Keep students healthy.
- Stabilize neighborhoods so families live with a sense of security.

More than 200 organizations applied for Promise Neighborhoods grants, but only 15 proposals were selected. Applicants came from 45 states plus American Samoa and Puerto Rico.

Santana said Reading and Beyond and its partners realize the national spotlight is on them. He said they want to create and execute a plan that will be a model for other cities.

"Fresno -- this is our opportunity to shine," Santana said.