

# Preschoolers hit the books

*Little Sprouts' literacy program gets youngest readers ready*

By Steve Whipple

## MethuenLife Writer

The flurry of activity on Branch Street, Methuen, began even before the Festival of Trees arrived there this year, and has continued right along.

Here's why: A few months back, the Little Sprouts Growing Center, located in the same building as the festival, applied for a hefty U.S. Department of Education grant called "Early Reading First" to develop preschool centers of excellence.

"Its primary goal is to get children ready to read so they'll have a higher rate of success," explains Literacy Director Julie Salois.

In October, Little Sprouts — which also has centers in Andover, the Northern Essex Community College campus and Lowell — was awarded the \$1.5 million federal grant, good for three years. Julie says they are the only for-profit child-care center in the country to receive such a grant. Other similar grants were awarded to centers affiliated with the local school system.

The program targets children 2.9 to 5 years old and ensures that the child is constantly exposed to letters, numbers and words. The youngsters are asked to identify and step on letters on the floor, so a trip to the art room may first require a hop, skip and jump across the alphabet.



**Little Sprouts Kindergarten teacher Linda Rudolph reads to (L to R) Christopher Vallant, Anna Dobrosielski, Renae Luongo and German**

At snack time, kids are encouraged to chat to further oral language.

The center is held accountable to the federal government. A series of assessments, such as

rhyming, reasoning and vocabulary, is given to the child when he first enters the program and again in June. The Department of Education states that the child must show measurable growth or any future grants to the center are jeopardized.

In Methuen the substantial grant provides for:

- a staff of 28 to oversee the 130 children.
- additional upgrades and rooms (art room, kiln/pottery area, gross motor room, eight classrooms) in the 15,000-square-foot center.

**"It used to be that preschool was baby-sitting. Now, what goes on in the school system goes on here and at all preschool centers."  
Little Sprouts Literacy Director Julie Salois**



**Godsmack bass player and Methuen High grad Robbie Merrill with Little Sprouts president Susan Leger Ferraro at a recent fundraiser.**

- a family literacy coach to set up a curriculum for parents.
- an intervention specialist to work

with children whose scores fall below the norm.

- professional development/tuition reimbursement plan with Northern Essex Community College to help the staff advance.

Then there's the \$50,000 set aside for scholarships to the Little Sprouts. Money is still available to qualified parents who may be single, poor or non-English speaking. They would pay a sliding fee between \$0 and \$100 a week.

Julie says day-care centers have placed a much greater emphasis on early reading.

"There's been a change in day cares the last 10 years," she notes. "It used to be that preschool was baby-sitting. Now, what goes on in the school system goes on here and at all preschool centers."

The Methuen site is also the headquarters of the nonprofit Leadership and Literacy Foundation which focuses more on training and outreach.

A recent fund-raiser for books and training featured "Dinner with Robbie." Robbie Merrill is the bass player for the hard-rock band Godsmack and a 1981 Methuen High grad. • **ML**