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**Born Learning Trail connects early learners to literacy in Whitewater**

Written by Kristine Zaballos

A new public trail that helps parents and other caregivers engage in fun activities when out on a stroll is breaking ground in Starin Park in the city of Whitewater. The project is a collaboration between the City of Whitewater, the Children’s Center at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, the Whitewater Public Library, and several community organizations.

The trail was spearheaded by Jennalee Johnson, a lead teacher in the [**Children’s Center**](https://www.uww.edu/childrenscenter) — an [**award-winning early childhood education and childcare program**](https://www.uww.edu/news/archive/2024-05-childrens-center) on campus.

“In January 2020, I was getting my National Geographic Educator Certification, and decided with a group of 2 and 3 year olds that we would study the campus map,” said Johnson.

Johnson, who earned bachelor’s degrees in early childhood and elementary education as well as a master’s degree in early childhood education and childcare policy at UW-Whitewater, printed and laminated maps and helped her young students learn how to orient themselves on campus using the map and landmarks. As they revisited favorite spots such as the [**Campus Memory Garden**](https://www.uww.edu/memory-garden), Johnson imagined ways to create activities that her students and others could enjoy in their favorite locations. Then, just as the idea was taking shape, the pandemic shut their adventures down.

“Later on, as I did research, I learned about the [**Born Learning Trail**](https://bornlearning.org/), which is all about getting children outside and connected to nature and to early learning activities with their caregivers,” said Johnson.

**A collaborative approach to funding the trail**

Johnson reached out to the United Way, which sponsors the Born Learning initiative, and found that the trail can be ordered as a kit that includes instructions, hardware, and reinforced, full-color metal signs in both English and Spanish. As she shared the idea, the City of Whitewater committed to working to find the right location and providing city staff labor to install the signposts.

“When Jennalee brought this idea to us, we were immediately excited,” said Kevin Boehm, Whitewater Parks and Recreation Director. “The Born Learning Trail fits perfectly with our mission to enhance the quality of life for everyone who lives, works, and plays in Whitewater. It brings early learning and outdoor fun together in a way that truly strengthens our community. And it wouldn’t be possible without the incredible collaboration between the city, the university, the library, and our community partners. When we work together, great things happen for Whitewater’s families.”

After the project was presented to the Parks and Recreation Board in July 2025, Starin Park was selected as the best location for the trail. The 35-acre park, established in 1888 and located on the north side of the city, borders the university campus and is used by the Children’s Center and other campus groups.

The project was made possible through grants from Whitewater Leads, the Whitewater Community Foundation, support from the Whitewater Public Library, and CCAMPIS funding meant to enhance inclusive spaces for families, including UW-Whitewater students. As part of the 50th anniversary of the Children’s Center, staff fundraised for the project as well.

**Supporting early literacy**

Whitewater Leads, a nonprofit organization founded in 2015 that works to support literacy in all of its diverse forms within the boundaries of the Whitewater Unified School District, awarded the project a Whitewater Leads Literacy Grant of $500.

“This project is fully consistent with our mission to support early literacy,” said Larry Kachel, president of Whitewater Leads, Inc. “We know that if children are not reading proficiently by third grade, there is an extremely high probability they will never become proficient readers. We currently have 375 kids in the program, and hope that this trail will help us reach more families.”

Every month, Whitewater Leads provides free books to children under the age of 5 who live in the Whitewater Unified School District through a partnership with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library Program. Since Whitewater Leads was founded, over 34,000 books have been distributed at no cost to more than 1,100 Whitewater-area kids. One of every six books is dual-language, which is important in a school district where an estimated 40% of school age children are Hispanic/Latino.

Kristen Linzmeier, associate professor of curriculum and instruction at UW-Whitewater, is also a member of Whitewater Leads. Linzmeier, who teaches courses on early childhood literacy as well as family engagement and empowerment, points to the way the trail empowers caregivers as a child’s first teacher.

“The trail encourages co-play and conversation, which leads to vocabulary development, narrative skills, and the idea of reading and playing as essential pathways to school readiness,” said Linzmeier. “And it’s free and accessible.”

“I love how public spaces can provide opportunities for a literacy-rich environment and promote early learning — causing us as educators to think outside of the school walls.”

The Whitewater Public Library provided funding to purchase the Spanish-language signs for the trail.

"The Whitewater Public Library is thrilled to sponsor the Spanish-language signs for the Born Learning Trail, which aligns with our mission of supporting early learning and fostering an inclusive community,” said Sarah French, assistant director for the library and a UW-Whitewater alum.

"We plan on hosting library meetups at the Born Learning Trail to expand its impact and help library users connect to this wonderful outdoor literacy space!”

The trail, which is a third of a mile long, starts at the playground, runs east along Starin Road, winds through ball fields and heads back to the community building, which houses Seniors in the Park. It was unveiled during a ceremony that included the project’s main sponsors on Saturday, Nov. 22.

Upkeep of the path, including freshening the paint on activities painted on the sidewalks and paths, will be supported by UW-Whitewater students participating in the university’s [**Make a Difference Day**](https://events.uww.edu/event/9087-make-a-difference-day) each year.

Johnson is happy to see how the trail will connect children to the environment and the caregivers around them.

“How students feel connected impacts their success at school.”