

Literacy needs vital support

July 27, 2007

The Ruston Daily Leader

The \$200,000 earmark Fifth District U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander squeezed into the House Appropriations Bills for the 2008 budget for the Northeast Louisiana Family Literacy Consortium is vital.

The program works to provide comprehensive family literacy services — for children and the parents that care for them — through five local centers in the national Even Start program.

It used to be eight centers. A 56 percent cut in 2006 and a 17 percent cut in 2007 put the squeeze on the local literacy programs, forcing four centers to close in Ouachita, Tensas, Morehouse and East Carroll parishes. Morehouse Parish's center was propped back up with a Migrant Education Grant, but the

whole system is still in jeopardy if more cuts are made.

And these centers provide services that are essential, said Consortium Director Kay Sharbono.

Work with adults focuses on attaining a high school diploma or G.E.D. Work with children includes reading and writing skills, early language skills and conversational ability.

Lincoln Parish's program, located at the Lincoln Parish Career Academy, is the state's crown jewel, rated at No. 1 in Louisiana. We're proud to stand behind it.

Sharbono said the link between a parent's level of educational attainment and the child's ability to achieve is proven, so addressing literacy and education as a family issue is key.

Hard times are common in social service funding, but Even Start has

seen a precipitous drop in recent years. The national program had \$250 million in 2000, and by 2007, funding had dwindled to \$88 million, Sharbono said.

The \$200,000 earmarked could make the difference for the consortium, which runs a budget of about \$750,000 for its five existing programs. It serves about 125 and has 25 certified employees, paraprofessionals and staffers.

Sharbono also worries that the current four-year funding cycle could be the last, and with no state money set aside for the program, it would completely cease to exist.

The program was earmarked for \$350,000 last year that never made it past committee. We hope that the Senate will follow the House's lead so that this vital program can get the funds it needs to keep serving our area.