

OPINION

Mentorship guides kids to a lifetime of literacy

MELINDA HAINES

The outlook on benchmark reading levels for third graders across Indiana has remained dismal, despite the state's strong support for K-12 education, including school choice, high-quality pre-K initiatives for low-income families, and research on the impact of dyslexia on learning.

Across the state, 20% of Hoosier third graders scored below grade level in 2022. In Allen County, that number is 23%.

While it is important to continue to study and implement the best methodologies that help more students become proficient readers, there is a more immediate solution that has been helping Allen County students in kindergarten through grade 3 improve their reading levels over the past 32 years: Project Reads.

Project Reads is an after-school program that



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matches trained volunteers with students who have been identified by the school as being below grade level in reading.

The program was founded in 1991 by a group of Fort Wayne business leaders to promote a literate and skilled citizenry and to support the area's public schools in their efforts to bring students to grade-level reading by the end of third grade.

In 2021, Project Reads became a program of The Literacy Alliance; we are proud to continue providing this impactful service free of charge to our county's schools and students.

During the most recent program year, Project Reads served 113 students at 15



Journal Gazette files

DeShawn Wert, then-executive director of Project Reads, listens to first grader Andrea Ramirez during a 2016 holiday celebration at Many Nations Church.

sites throughout Allen County, with 100% showing progress toward their goals. Ninety-four percent improved by four or more reading levels.

The success of the program hinges on the volunteers, who deliver the program through weekly one-on-one after-school meetings with the same child throughout the school year.

Elementary school administrators have welcomed Project Reads as a trusted partner in improving their students' literacy rates. Of the third graders who took part in Project Reads this past year, 67% passed the IREAD-3 state assessment; another 7% received a good cause exemption.

Last school year, we were

able to staff 15 of the 18 sites that requested to be a Project Reads site. This coming year, we anticipate that as many as 20 schools will make that same request.

To fulfill all these requests, we will need to increase the number of volunteers willing to mentor the students who want to improve their reading skills and ensure their future academic success.

To fully staff all 20 schools - which are located in all four community districts and one parochial school, and include high-need schools in low-income neighborhoods - we need to double our volunteer base so we can provide a tutor for each child who would benefit from the program.

The time commitment is one hour a week throughout the school year, and we have sites available throughout the county, with most of them at Fort Wayne Community Schools.

TO VOLUNTEER



Visit literacyalliance.org/volunteer to fill out an application or contact The Literacy Alliance volunteer coordinator, Nikki Minarik, at 260-423-0008 or nikki@literacyalliance.org. Volunteers do not need any special experience and will be fully trained in advance of their match.

Volunteering for Project Reads is a wonderful way to help a child succeed academically and build a life-changing relationship at the same time right here in our community. As a nonprofit serving our community since 1972, we look forward to continuing to address and conquer literacy challenges. Won't you join us?