

Volunteering to help kids grow as readers works

Matt Wire
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There’s a moment in a child’s education that quietly decides a lot about what comes next: the end of third grade. Up to that point, teachers spend most of their time teaching kids how to read. After third grade, kids are expected to already know how to read, so they can use that skill to learn everything else, from math word problems to science and history.

A child who reaches that point without solid reading skills doesn’t just fall behind in reading. They start falling behind in every subject. National research shows children who aren’t reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma than their peers. Add poverty to the mix, and the odds get even tougher.

The good news is that Indiana keeps making real progress. New numbers released this month show that 88.7% of Indiana third graders passed the state’s reading exam, IREAD-3, in 2026, up from 87.2% the year before. That’s the fifth year in a row that scores have gone up, and the highest pass rate since before the pandemic. Allen County has been part of that climb, too. In the most recent school-level results, every county district improved: Northwest Allen County Schools reached 94%, Fort Wayne Community Schools jumped to 82.5%, and East Allen County Schools rose to 83.7%.

Those numbers are worth celebrating. But a meaningful number of Allen County kids are still not reading where they need to be, and each one of them can catch up with the right support.

That’s where Project Reads comes in. Part of The Literacy Alliance, Project Reads is an after-school program that pairs trained volunteers with kindergarten through third grade students at schools across Allen County for one hour a week, from September through April. The program provides full training, materials and on-site support to ensure volunteer and student success.

We know it works. Last year, 120 volunteer tutors partnered with 116 students at 16 schools. Every single one of those students grew as a reader, and among the Project Reads third graders who took the IREAD-3 test, 94% passed.

As a new school year approaches, Project Reads is growing its volunteer team across Allen County. You don’t need a teaching degree, just one hour a week and a willingness to help a child sound out words and fall in love with reading. That’s less time than a trip to the grocery store, and it could make the difference between a child who struggles in school and one who thrives.

Whether you’re a retiree, a college student or a professional, there’s a place for you at a school near you. Call The Literacy Alliance at 260-423-0008 or visit literacyalliance.org to sign up.

One hour a week from you could be the reason a child in Allen County grows up reading with confidence.