

## **Ready Readers: Bringing Literacy into the Home and Beyond**

Story by Katie Lehman and Sidney Barkdull, Ready Readers Staff for the Muncie Public Library

“But, I don’t know how to read,” said the kindergarten student as he looked at me with confused eyes. It’s been three months since we’ve begun working together and he is finally ready to read on his own for the first time, although he’s not too confident in his abilities just yet. “I think if you open the book and give it a try you’ll surprise yourself,” I replied with a smile. With hesitant eyes and hands, he opened the book to the first page. I watched his face as he read the first word and then all that followed until he finished the page. He looked up, eyes bright, face full of excitement, and shouted, “I can read!” According to the Ready Readers Program Supervisor, Katie Lehman, this story illustrates just the first in an ever-growing line of successes for an innovative early literacy program “In the years that have followed, we have seen countless students have those “ah-ha” moments, and every time we do it is just as special as the first,” said Lehman.

The Ready Readers program is a free, one-on-one literacy training and reading tutoring service that operates under the auspices of Muncie Public Library (MPL) in Muncie, Indiana. The program serves 40 children, ages 1-12 through thirty-minute in-home or library-based sessions. “The program grew out of our concern over the declining literacy rates in our community,” said Akilah S. Nosakhere, Library Director at MPL. “We know that early literacy interventions work and it made sense for MPL to prioritize this important issue.”

According to Ready Readers staff, the parent or guardian of the child arranges the session time based on their schedule. Each session is individualized for the child, as they each come with different strengths and areas in need of improvement. “Students also respond to different themes or subjects,” said Sidney Barkdull, an Early Literacy Assistant with the program. “We can customize the literacy games and activities to reflect the child’s interests, whether it is animals, sports, or other topics,” she said. Parents are encouraged to participate in their child’s session. If they choose not to do so, they must remain in the library. If the session takes place in the home, they must remain in the room where the session is occurring. At the end of each session, parents are given a summary of what was worked on, areas needing additional attention at home, and any other pertinent information.

There are multiple aspects to the program that make it unique, the most notable being the option of in-home learning sessions. While many social services employees work in the homes of clients, it is not often the case to find library employees doing this. According to Lehman, in-home sessions are conducted in much the same way as the library-based sessions, except they normally take place at a kitchen table or on the living room floor. This removes many barriers families face when trying to find reading help and it allows the Ready Reader tutor to develop a better working relationship with the student alongside their parents or caregivers. “Many families begin to share their child’s successes and struggles with the tutor, opening up and allowing them to interact on a more personal level, thus building trust and rapport with the family and the child,” said Lehman.

In the nearly five years since it has been in operation, the Ready Readers program has served more than 100 children in the Muncie community through one-on-one sessions. To date, 26 children have graduated from the program. To achieve this, a student must be at or above grade level in all areas assessed. On average, students who participate in the program increase their reading proficiency by two

levels in the fall and two and a half levels in the spring. These average levels of increase have remained steady despite the changing ages and abilities of the students participating.

Lehman and her staff cite parental feedback along with program data collection as equally important in thoroughly documenting the average progress a Ready Readers student makes. "We just got our daughter's IReady test results. She had 59% growth in reading and is above grade level in reading comprehension! I'm confident that Ready Readers played a big part in that!" According to Lehman, messages such as this are common especially following a round of standardized IReady testing at local schools. IReady is a system that provides assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses of students in grades K-8. "We receive messages such as this regularly and they always bring a smile to our faces—it means all of the hard work, ours and theirs, is paying off," said Lehman, who credits the program's continued success to the relationships that tutors develop with the families enrolled. "Without the support of the parents and guardians in the program, we would not see the same level of success," she said.

Ready Readers has undergone many transformations since it began in 2016, from expanding the space it occupies inside the Maring-Hunt Library branch of the MPL, to refining the learning materials used during the sessions. Recently, the staff of Ready Readers had to act quickly to continue to deliver tutoring sessions virtually during the pandemic. All of that aside, Lehman has big plans for the program that operates as a part of the learning and literacy enrichment mission of the Muncie Public Library. "As we look forward to how we will grow in the future, we are hoping to expand outside of the library and incorporate community partners as satellite sites for the program," she said. "Ultimately, it is my hope and goal to see the Ready Readers program service model expand not only within our community but to other communities as well," said Lehman. "Each community will be different and have its own unique challenges to address, but that's the beauty of the Ready Readers program. It can be adapted to fit the community it serves. Whether that service takes place at a library, in-home, at a community center, or anywhere else in between. With the right training and the right tools, anyone can implement this program and begin to make a change in their community."

*Lehman encourages any library system or other community organization interested in replicating the Ready Readers Early Literacy program to reach out to her at MPL to find out how to start a similar program. Contact Lehman at [katie.lehman@munpl.org](mailto:katie.lehman@munpl.org). or discover more about Ready Readers at the library's website at [www.munciepubliclibrary.org](http://www.munciepubliclibrary.org).*

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