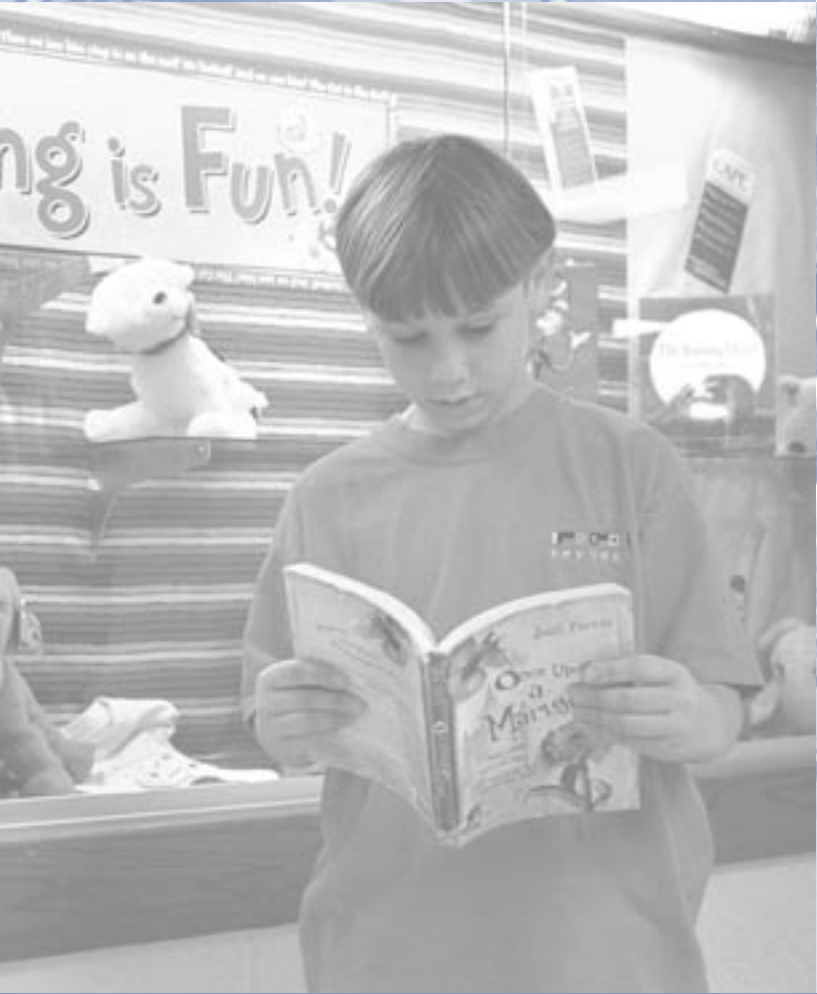


# *Parent Leadership for Student Achievement*



*A STORY of OPPORTUNITY, DETERMINATION & SUCCESS*



# Parent Leadership for Student Achievement

## A STORY of OPPORTUNITY, DETERMINATION & SUCCESS

**T**HIS IS A STORY OF 24 WOMEN WHO helped parents—and whole communities—improve their children’s reading achievement. These women came together from five separate public school districts in Madison County, Indiana, to develop and pioneer a model parent leadership and outreach strategy called the *Family Reading Connections* program. The results of this innovative program that ***leaves no child behind*** and also ***leaves no parent behind*** are remarkable: Since the beginning of this initiative, the percentage of third-grade students in the 12 participating schools in Madison County who passed the language arts portion of the Indiana Statewide Test for Education Progress, the *ISTEP+* exam, ***increased by 20 percentage points from 45% to 65% in just three years!*** This increase represents a ***44% incremental growth*** over time toward all third-grade students reaching proficiency in reading and language arts skills!<sup>1</sup>

This story tells how people in five very diverse school communities focused their energies to work together and accomplished amazing results. It tells why—and how—the parent outreach program was created, how the women developed strategies to successfully reach other parents, and how their

story can be adapted to any school community by any organization that seeks to improve and enhance parent involvement, and ultimately, to improve student achievement.

### Who Were These Women?

The 24 women came from rural, suburban and urban areas across Madison County that are typical of many communities across the Midwest:

- Alexandria, “Small Town, USA,” a rural community where the largest employer was the school system of 2,200 students.
- Pendleton, a quaint, suburban community of tree-lined streets with antique shops and local artists.
- Neighborhoods on the west side of Anderson, the county’s largest urban area.
- Elwood, another small town at the intersection of two state highways, known as the “Heartland of America.”

- Frankton-Lapel, two tiny farming communities combined into one by state policy, but divided by the memory of many hard-fought high school games.

Some were single moms; some were married. Some had young children in tow, while others had grown children; a few were grandmothers. Some of the women had completed their high school education, while others had to drop out. A few had graduated from college. All came together with a shared mission and purpose: They had children attending the public schools, and they wanted their children and others to do better in school.

The story of these 24 women can inspire others to believe in themselves as parents, to work collaboratively as respected partners in their schools, and to know that parents anywhere can make a difference. Their work in the *Family Reading Connections* program, developed by the Leadership Academy of Madison County, is a parent leadership model to improve student achievement. It can be easily adapted to other school communities that seek to ***leave no parent behind!***

## Madison County Faces its Future

The Madison County story begins during the peak of the automobile industry in the woodsy hills and farmlands of the Midwest during the 1960's and 70's. The county was the ideal place in which to live, work and raise a family. Centrally located in the state and just north of Indianapolis, the state capital, Madison County was well connected to the hub of activity and state leadership, yet removed from the congestion and faster pace of city life.

General Motors recognized the benefits of this area and opened several large manufacturing plants, readily hiring a willing pool of county residents to

work on the automotive assembly and production lines.

Expectations for the good life were high. Many eager young workers took jobs right out of high school, and some signed up before they graduated. The pay was good, the benefits were remarkable, and the “American Dream” was available to all. Workers advanced on the line; when they retired, they encouraged their children to get a job at GM and take their place, rather than wasting any more time in school. One of the 24 women recalled, “My family has four generations of GM workers, and I was told to get out and hire on right away. I was discouraged from finishing school.”

But by the mid-1980's when this young mom was ready to work, the GM dream had faded. Production slowed, workers were laid off, and new jobs were few and far between. The impact of the manufacturing slowdown was devastating for this county, as it was for many “rust belt” regions in the Midwest. By the turn of the 21st century, Madison County had experienced the highest out-migration of any county in the state,<sup>2</sup> and only 11% of county residents had post-secondary education.<sup>3</sup> As these 24 women came together to begin their work in the *Family Reading Connections* program, Madison County ranked the lowest in per capita income and had the highest number of youth living in poverty in central Indiana.<sup>4</sup>

Madison County was caught between the low expectations of the past and the reality of a new world in which advanced education is essential to living, working and raising families. Prospects for the future were especially dim: In 1999, only 45% of the county's third-grade students in these 12 participating schools had mastered enough basic reading skills to demonstrate proficiency on the *ISTEP+* language arts exam.<sup>5</sup>

## Meeting the Challenge

Community leaders from the Madison County Community Foundation Board and the county's five school superintendents believed that parents needed to be involved in solutions for this dilemma and decided to take action. With support from CAPE (Community Alliances to Promote Education), an initiative of Lilly Endowment Inc., these leaders developed a three-year program to improve young students' reading achievement throughout the county. The Madison County CAPE initiative provided new and continuous assessments for teachers to guide reading instruction for over 6,100 students in kindergarten through third grade in 12 elementary schools, targeting all the elementary schools in four districts and three of the lowest achieving schools in the larger urban district.

The grant also supported a unique model of parent-to-parent leadership and outreach, called the *Family Reading Connections* program. This program had been designed by the Leadership Academy of Madison County, a nonprofit leadership development and training organization founded by Anderson University and the local

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Chamber of Commerce. While the participating schools focused on data-driven instruction and curriculum to *leave no child behind*, the Leadership Academy and the 24 women focused on connecting with families to *leave no parent behind*.

The results are astounding: Since the beginning of this initiative, when less than half of the third-graders in the 12 participating elementary schools passed the language arts portion of the *ISTEP+*, the number of passing students increased by **20 percentage points—resulting in a 44% incremental growth over time for these third-grade students acquiring literary skills!**

## Getting Started

The biggest challenge was stemming the tide of educational apathy that had developed from the comfort of low-skilled, high-paid jobs at GM. The *Family Reading Connections* program directly focused on this challenge by hiring parents—two from each school—to be paid for their time to connect with other parents. The assumption was that if parents were the people in the community who were talking about the importance of reading, their messages would help other parents become involved in their child's education. And reach out they did, many times each month during the school year in multiple ways with messages, books, and activities about the importance of daily reading and the value of learning. This “out of the box” model of parent involvement was developed and guided by the Leadership Academy of Madison County.

The first step toward implementing this unique model of parent outreach was for the Leadership Academy staff to meet with each school principal from the 12 participating schools to explain the purpose of the *Family Reading Connections*

program and how this parent involvement initiative could benefit their school.

Together with each building principal, Leadership Academy staff advertised and recruited for the two paid parent facilitator positions housed at each school, and then hired a total of 24 parents to be Family Reading Facilitators. Once hired, they began their leadership and outreach training under the careful tutelage of the Leadership Academy. Their mission was to build bridges through multiple relationships in their school communities to advance student achievement. They learned how to build relationships between parents and teachers, between parents and other parents, between children and their schools, and between schools and their communities. The Family Reading Facilitators carried out this mission and their passion for the *Family Reading Connections* activities based on an understanding that:

- All parents want their children to succeed in school.
- All teachers want their students to learn.
- When parents and teachers work well together, children's learning increases.

## What Did the 24 Women Do?

The 24 Family Reading Facilitators were hired to work in pairs at each elementary school, 10 months of the year, for 15 hours a week. Actual hours were set to be flexible according to the goals of their activities. The work of the *Family Reading Connections* program was research-based, knowing that families who read together have children who do well in school.<sup>6</sup> Family Reading Facilitators encouraged other families to engage in a 20-minute



daily reading practice with their young readers, five times a week outside the school day. To accomplish this task, Facilitators had to make the link for many families between the importance of reading and academic success. They had to build bridges between parent involvement and school events that supported daily family literacy practice to improve reading skills. The 24 women provided reading incentives, put out regular messages about the importance of reading, and organized family-centered reading events in their school communities that were enjoyable for both parents and children and could often be replicated at home. These included:

### *Promise to Read*

To encourage and promote daily literacy practice, the *Family Reading Connections* program developed a family reading compact, called the *Promise to Read*, which families signed at the beginning of each school year.<sup>7</sup> Teachers provided the compacts to each student and collected their weekly reading records. Facilitators compiled and tabulated the results for the young readers, their teachers, principals and parents to review. Periodically throughout

the school year, Family Reading Facilitators sponsored reading contests, distributed incentives and awarded “public” recognition to the students, families and teachers for their efforts in practicing daily reading throughout the school year.

Family Reading Facilitators were visible at every school-sponsored event, including kindergarten round-ups, parent-teacher conferences, book fairs, and fall festivals, taking advantage of each opportunity to promote the importance of reading. They distributed new compact and weekly reading sheets, shared messages about the importance of daily family literacy, gave away free paperback books, and provided tips for daily reading at home. They organized book walks and Bingo for Books games during school carnivals, and even attended after-school games and sports events with books in hand, so parents and children could read together in the stands as they attended a sibling’s game.

Young readers were often the Family Reading Facilitators’ biggest fans. In their communities, the women would often hear, “Oh, there goes our CAPE lady. She gives us books!”



Or as a kindergarten student exclaimed in the grocery store one Saturday morning when she saw the “CAPE lady” from her school, “I read it! I read the whole book!”

Even these strategies were not enough to *leave no parent behind*, and connecting with every parent was the primary goal. Working diligently and persistently, the women reached beyond traditional school events to connect with parents about daily reading through creative and innovative strategies. The following stories highlight some of their strategies for reaching out, shared here to inspire other school communities and parents to help their children succeed.

#### *Front Porch Greetings*

Four Family Reading Facilitators in two very different school communities were successful in using this strategy to reach other parents. In one urban elementary school, parents were so disconnected from the school that they rarely attended “Back to School Night” in the fall or the parent-teacher conferences six weeks later to pick up their child’s report card. Discouraged because children’s results

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on the statewide assessment were extremely low, the principal asked the Family Reading Facilitators to help turn this situation around.

This pair of Family Reading Facilitators scheduled front porch visits with every family with a child in the second or third grade during the next two summers. For weeks, they walked through surrounding neighborhoods, knocking on doors and talking to parents about the importance of reading and the upcoming fall statewide assessment. They left paperback books with each family, along with tips for helping children prepare for taking a test. The results in this school were remarkable: By the third year, the percentage of third-grade students who passed the *ISTEP+* language arts exam had increased by **17 percentage points from 26% before the program began to 43%** after the Front Porch Greetings were conducted. ***This increase reflects a 65% incremental growth*** toward all third graders demonstrating literary proficiency skills at this school.

“The contacts they made, encouraging families

to come to school, made a big difference. This is a remarkable increase (in parent attendance and increased test scores) from past years!” said the school’s principal.

In a small town, another team of Family Reading Facilitators also used the Front Porch Greeters strategy to connect with parents. These two women began their outreach to second-grade families by sending home flyers in students’ backpacks to let parents know they would be calling them at home. They followed up with personal calls to each family welcoming them to the new school year, asking what their interests and expectations were for the new school year, and scheduling a visit to their home. During the visit, they gave a book to each child in the family. Parents received information about *ISTEP+*, a word list for their child to study, and other materials about the *Family Reading Connections* program.

What happened as a result of their outreach efforts? In this school, the number of third-grade students who demonstrated proficiency on the



## Spooky Read-In

For this event, the team of Family Reading Facilitators planned a series of messages and reading events so that, from the time a family signed in at the front door of the school to the time they left the building with a goodbye from their principal, they experienced, touched and heard messages about the importance of reading every day. For example, children and their parents went into a dark room where a teacher, dressed as a witch, had a sign on her door to come in and have your palm read. When the children entered, she asked each child, “Do you want your palm “red?” When they answered yes, she wrote on their hand in red ink a reminder to “read!” The older students

understood the play on words. The younger ones learned to recognize the word *read*, and they all left the room with advice for becoming a successful young reader.

*ISTEP+* language arts exam increased by **13 percentage points from 50% before the Front Porch Greetings were conducted, to 63% passing in just two years.** This school saw a **26% incremental growth over time** toward all third graders passing this portion of the language arts statewide assessment.

### *Spooky Read-In*

“YUCK!” exclaimed a first-grader as he reached into the pan and grabbed hold of a squishy, soft goeey “brain” made from the stuff called GAK. “Yah, you better watch out,” warned his older sister. “That could be your brain if you watch too much TV.”

The Spooky Read-In was a great success in several small, rural communities in the county. In one school, family participation at PTO events had dramatically declined. The principal wanted families to come to the school and enjoy themselves while they were there. So he asked the Family Reading Facilitators to help. Was he ever surprised! Practically the whole town was in the school building for this fall event. (He knows because his pillowcase bag of candy was empty, and he saw people that he had not seen in years come through his school doors to enjoy the fun.) In another rural community there were no safe neighborhoods where children could Trick or Treat. The Spooky Read-In event at this school became the Halloween tradition in this community. Parents appreciated and supported the event for both the safety and fun it provided.

In the “brain” room, children wore blindfolds when they got to touch different kinds of brains—some as small as a raisin that had read no books, some all squishy and slimy because they had watched too much TV, and some large and firm that glowed in the dark because they were “growing” from all the knowledge they had acquired through reading.



In dark hallways, children read spooky tales and poems with their parents, sitting on sleeping bags and reading with flashlights.

Outside the school, families heard spooky stories, told by another teacher dressed in costume, as they sat around a glowing campfire.

This school jumped by **26 percentage points from 48% of the third grade-students passing the *ISTEP+* language arts exam before the project to 74% passing after two years.** This represents a **54% incremental growth** in progress toward all third-grade students at this school demonstrating proficiency in literary skills. The principal was so pleased with the Spooky Read-In that he insisted the Family Reading Facilitators make it an annual occasion for the school community, and now the PTO helps to sponsor the event.

### *Kindergarten Family Workshop*

In another rural school, Family Reading Facilitators sponsored a Kindergarten Family Workshop. For this event, parents came to the school with their young students to try out seven different learning experiences which they could replicate at home

with their children. Families learned about different learning styles for children, bounced balls and waved scarves to sound out letters, wrote the alphabet in Jell-O mixed with shaving cream, read stories together for comprehension, fished for fish crackers with words on them and then ate their “catch,” and learned the Tucker Signing method which teaches young children to physically sound out words.

Teachers volunteered to help at each of the seven activity stations so they could meet children and their parents. Even school board members stepped in to assist. Childcare was offered for other youngsters in the family so that the new kindergartner had special time with his/her parent and with their new teacher. Every family left the evening with a bag full of supplies, including boxes of Jell-O, shaving cream, fish crackers, comprehension cubes, and other materials and instructions to replicate these learning experiences at home.

After three years, these Family Reading Facilitators proudly report that they have more teachers helping each year than there are stations available. Parents are also pleased. “It’s interesting to hear how closely

the teacher’s concerns mirror the parent’s concerns. Reading is one of the most important things we can teach our children.”

The real benefit is that the number of third-grade students who passed the *ISTEP+* language arts exam increased by **26 percentage points from 48% passing before the Kindergarten Family Workshop activities to 74% passing after two years**. This increase reflects a **74% incremental growth** toward all third-grade students at this school demonstrating proficiency in language arts skills.

The 24 parent Family Reading Facilitators developed additional activities to connect with other parents in their school communities with one overriding purpose: to involve parents in their child’s education and to help them understand the importance of daily reading, including *Hello . . . Did I Catch you Reading*, *Oprah’s Book Club Show*, *Hot Chocolate for Teachers*, *Family Lending Libraries*, *Bookworms for Lunch* and others. Descriptions of the activities, along with step-by-step instructions and illustrations, are available from the Leadership Academy of Madison County.

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## What Has Madison County Learned?

After three years of training, monitoring and collecting data, the Leadership Academy of Madison County and their community and educational partners have identified key lessons learned for successful parent involvement and outreach programs in any school community:

### *Lesson 1. Parent leadership builds communities around schools.*

Parent-to-parent connections can be a very stabilizing influence for school communities. School leadership changes, building principals move, school buildings close, merge and/or new facilities are built. In many school communities, the families themselves frequently move from one school to another. Parents who are perceived to be leaders can assure returning families and newcomers alike that “everything is still OK” in spite of system changes, and can be a great support for school leadership and a source of encouragement for students and their parents.

### *Lesson 2. School and community support are essential.*

Parent involvement alone will not produce the kinds of successes that Madison County has experienced unless it includes the supportive, welcoming involvement of the entire school community.<sup>8</sup> Educators and community leaders remained focused and quite clear about what they wanted to accomplish in the *Family Reading Connections* program. They put their energies into supporting the Family Reading Facilitators so that the parents ***did not work in isolation from the school***, but rather ***with the school*** as true partners in supporting children’s reading process.

Principals ensured that space was available somewhere in the school for the Family Reading Facilitators to work. Teachers promoted the

*Promise to Read* initiative in their classrooms and assisted the parent Family Reading Facilitators in disseminating books, Compacts to Read and literature about family literacy. Classroom teachers also helped collect the *Promise to Read* records because principals, teachers, parents and students—all in the school community—were interested in how many minutes students were reading each day outside of school time. PTO parents and teachers volunteered at many of the family reading events and often contributed prizes and food. Even community leaders and business people donated prizes, books and incentives for reading, and parents helped spread the word about the top student readers each month.

The *Family Reading Connections* parent leadership model worked because it was and continues to be important to the entire school community to assist young students in learning to read, and because it provides outreach and support for families in helping their young readers. It makes the link for parents between reading and the future academic success of their children. The Family Reading Facilitators increased parents’ connection to the schools and helped families understand the importance of education.

Several principals clearly understand the value of parent leaders and have supported their teams

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“Reading at home  
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of Family Reading Facilitators by announcing, “Reading at home will be an expectation of all our parents at this school.”

*Lesson 3. School and community cultures are unique and worthy of respect.*

Parent leaders in Madison County learned that each school community is unique and that strategies do not work equally well in every community. Although the goals remained the same, the path to those goals was as different as the 12 participating school communities. In smaller towns, where people knew each other well and saw each other frequently, knocking on front doors was considered invasive and “prying,” while in urban neighborhoods where families moved frequently, knocking on front doors to welcome families to the school community was greatly appreciated and viewed as being very “caring” about your neighbors. In suburban schools, letters home to parents that identified the number of minutes their child read, in comparison to the class average and the highest reader-of-the-week, was an incentive to encourage families to make daily reading a family priority. In some rural school communities, however, that type of message was a “turn off” for families, because it appeared to tell parents what to do with their children.

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“Our parent-to-parent communication is basic. We aren’t the experts. We just know how reading works in our families.”

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No matter what approach they used, Family Reading Facilitators who lived in these school communities understood how best to reach other parents. To be effective they were respectful of the school and community culture.

As one parent stated in a recent workshop, “Our parent-to-parent communication is basic. We aren’t the experts. We just know how reading works in our families.” Another parent who lives a difficult life also commented about the effectiveness of this model’s parent outreach strategies: “We are successful because we are reaching out to other parents who are just like me.”

*Lesson 4. Schools need to value parents as partners.<sup>9</sup>*

The *Family Reading Connections* program in Madison County worked to **leave no parent behind** as the schools diligently worked to **leave no child behind** in reading. School principals and other administrators recognized the value of having parents paid to be the Family Reading Facilitators in each school so they could be held accountable for their work in assisting each school

community achieve its reading goals. In Madison County the 24 women were valued both as parents and as Family Reading Facilitators and were compensated for their time—15 hours per week over 10 months of the school year—to reach out to other parents. This parent-to-parent connection was an invaluable strategy for reaching parents who were least connected with their schools. The time and energy these 24 Family Reading Facilitators spent in talking with other parents and engaging them in understanding the importance of daily reading were critical to this county’s remarkable success.

One principal remarked early on in the program, “The Family Reading Facilitators can do what none of us (educators) do nearly as well, or even have time to do: They can talk parent-to-parent with all our families to continually keep them involved in their child’s education.”

*Lesson 5. Relationships matter.*

Regardless of differences in school community culture, building relationships across all constituencies is very important to creating effective parent



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involvement in the school. In each elementary school, relationship-building strategies were developed to respond to the unique characteristics of the school community. In some school communities, the facilitators built a relationship first with the principal, then moved to teachers and students, and then ultimately to the parents. In others, parent involvement grew when the team of Family Reading Facilitators built a strong relationship with the principal first, then concentrated on parents and students, reaching out last to each classroom teacher. And in another group of schools, once the principal had selected the Family Reading Facilitators, the best strategy was to work with the parents and students first, occasionally checking in with the school staff and principal.

*Lesson 6. Building parent leadership is key.*

Because the 24 women were parents with children enrolled in the school, they were a natural yet untapped resource that could greatly benefit their local school communities. They lived in the community; they knew other parents in their schools; and they had a vested interest in the students’ and the school’s educational success. What parent facilitators needed were the leadership skills and training to be able to effectively connect with other parents. Understanding how to be effective parent leaders enabled them to become bridge builders among student, family, school and community partners to improve student achievement.

The Leadership Academy’s sponsorship of the *Family Reading Connections* program—and the training and guidance they provided for the Family Reading Facilitators—helped the 24 women progress from being interested parents to being leaders and bridge builders in their local school communities for the benefit of all young readers.

Because these 24 women believed in themselves, they believed in other parents too and learned how

to *leave no parent behind* in their outreach efforts with others.

## The Results of this Parent Involvement Model

The successes speak for themselves: *The 20 percentage point increase* of third graders in the 12 schools in Madison County’s five districts who passed the *ISTEP+* language arts exam—*45% before the initiative to 65% after three years—represents a 44% incremental growth* toward all their third-grade students demonstrating proficiency in language arts and literacy skills. *Their progress was the largest incremental growth of third-grade students passing this portion of the ISTEP+ language arts exam in the nine county central Indiana region.* There are other important indicators of success:

- Before the reading initiative began, only *one school* (out of 12) had 70% or more of its third grade students pass the *ISTEP+* language arts exam, *but . . .*
- After three years of the initiative, 70% or more of third-grade students passed the exam in *seven schools.*
- In the five of seven schools where 70% or more third-grade students passed the exam, *more than half of these families* were reading outside the school day for 20 minutes in the *Promise to Read* program.

## What Did the Leadership Academy Do in Madison County?

Working with the Leadership Academy of Madison County, the 24 women discovered their own

leadership skills as Family Reading Facilitators. Monthly trainings taught the women to believe in themselves as “know-ers” in their own communities, and to share what they already knew and also what they had learned in ways that encouraged other parents to become “know-ers” too. These 24 women now passionately believe parent involvement is vitally important to educating every young reader. They want other parents to understand how important their involvement is to their child’s academic success and for other parents to see themselves as equal partners in supporting education in their school communities.

Since 1982, the Leadership Academy of Madison County has been providing leadership training throughout the central Indiana region to over 600 community leaders and youth. Their work is guided by the research of Robert Greenleaf, Max De Pree, Parker Palmer and Stephen Covey in belief that everyone has an ability to lead. The Academy convenes leadership visionaries from all types of organizations and trains them in how to think critically, resolve community issues, and work collaboratively with diverse peoples. It is the ideal partner to provide leadership training for parents for student achievement as well.

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“At first I didn’t understand why we needed all the training. But now I see that it was so positive. It made us realize we are capable, and it enabled me to do more.”

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## Developing Parent Leadership Skills

The Leadership Academy of Madison County has focused on building better dialogue, creating richer appreciation among the various partners for what works well, and facilitating the creative energy of parents and educators to assist young readers in achieving academic success. They have based their parent leadership sessions on the *Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership* program developed by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Lexington, Kentucky. Both models focus on helping parents understand: ***How can I, as a parent, make a difference?*** The Academy's parent leadership sessions include support in the following skills:

- **Building Relationships as a Team**, including the four types of adult learning styles, the stages of a learning community, and how to problem solve by valuing adult learning.
- **Building Relationships with Schools**, including an effective collaboration model, insight into school and community cultures, and strategies for working effectively in both organizational cultures.
- **Building Relationships with Families**, where participants learn to understand the

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“Our Family Reading Facilitators are invaluable to our school in achieving our goals.”

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framework of poverty, challenges to 21st century families, respecting differences and knowing your message.

- **Best Family Literacy Practices**, in which participants collect tips on reading for busy families, how to understand academic growth data and their child's report card.
- **Project Management**, in which parents are taught how best to collect data and use it to drive effective decision making. They are coached in goal-focused family literacy activities at the schools, and learn how to assist community partners in achieving goals.

In addition to the monthly training sessions, the Family Reading Facilitators gather regularly to encourage and support one another. Their meetings involve celebrating their successes; sharing “stories” of what has worked well; brainstorming new strategies to connect effectively with disengaged parents; learning how to make effective presentations to their school boards, libraries, and other community groups; and learning how to recognize the accomplishments of teachers, principals, students and families in daily literacy practices. Through their leadership development experience, the 24 women have grown in their positions, gained confidence in their work and have been bridge builders and champions for daily family reading.

After one of their group sessions, a Family Reading Facilitator who realized the value of the leadership training remarked: “At first I didn't understand why we needed all the training. But now I see that it was so positive. It made us realize we are capable, and it enabled me to do more.” And another parent speaking about their training experience simply said, “It works!”

“Our Family Reading Facilitators are invaluable to our school in achieving our goals,” commented a very satisfied customer, one of the participating principals.

## What Can the Leadership Academy Do For Your School and/or Your Community?

The Leadership Academy is ready to assist other educators and parents in reaching these academic goals. The Academy is enhancing the *Family Reading Connections* program in Madison County to include more parents at each of the current schools and expanding the program into other school communities throughout the county. Proceeds from Academy publications and parent leadership sessions will help support the expansion of this parent involvement model. The Leadership Academy envisions creating a culture in which effective parent leaders are able to reach out and connect with other parents about the importance of early childhood literacy and the value of education, ultimately ensuring every child’s academic success.

Many schools in the Midwest are working hard to ***leave no child behind***, but educators cannot do this work alone. They must also ***leave no parent behind*** and involve parents as equal partners and bridge builders with other parents to improve students’ academic achievement.

Please contact the Leadership Academy for further information to develop an effective parent involvement model in your own school community. The Academy is prepared to directly support schools, as well as community and parent organizations, in developing parent leadership skills by adapting this model to specifically meet your needs. Our staff can answer questions about the *Family Reading*

*Connections* program and would love to hear your stories of parent involvement. The Leadership Academy of Madison County can provide a parent leadership training guide, and facilitate leadership sessions with parents. Support from the Academy can include:

- Arranging a visit to Madison County school community sites to see the *Family Reading Connections* program at work.
- Consulting about new strategies for increased parental involvement.
- Sharing “cookbooks” of Family Reading activities that have worked well in Madison County school communities.
- Facilitating parent leadership training sessions for a team or group of parents in your school community.
- Sharing tips for collecting and disseminating parent involvement data.
- Supporting your organization in training effective parent leaders in your own school communities.
- Working with you on additional ideas you may have.

The Leadership Academy of Madison County is waiting to hear from you! Give us a call at (765) 641-3863, or go online to our Web site: [www.anderson.edu/lamc](http://www.anderson.edu/lamc).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this document, “passing” the *ISTEP+* (Indiana Statewide Test for Education Progress) and “reaching proficiency” are used interchangeably.

Throughout the text, examples of the parent outreach activities and the results of their efforts are represented with two sets of data. The first set shows the difference in percentage points of those third-grade students at a particular school who passed the *ISTEP+* language arts exam before the initiative began (*the “beginning score”*), and those who passed after the Family Reading Facilitators concluded their activities (*the “ending score”*).

The second set of data shows the percent of incremental growth toward *all* students passing. This percent is calculated by taking the difference between the beginning and ending scores, and dividing this difference by the lowest score. *Example:* If 45% of a school’s students passed the *ISTEP+* language arts exam at the beginning of the initiative, then a 100% incremental *growth* would mean that 90% of the students had passed the *ISTEP+* language arts exam at the end of the project.

<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau – 2000

<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau – 1998 update

<sup>4</sup> See individual county data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kids Count in Indiana 1999 Data Book: “County Profiles of Child Well-Being.”*

<sup>5</sup> Indiana Department of Education – 1999 raw data source

<sup>6</sup> Educators and parents have intuitively understood that a child needs to practice new skills, and learning to read is no different than learning other childhood developmental milestones. Ensuring that each young student has enough time to practice reading in today’s fast paced world is the real challenge for families. The information from “Growth in Reading and How Children Spend Their Time Outside of School,” by Anderson, R.; Wilson, P.; and Fielding, L., *Reading Research Quarterly*, Vol. 23, pp 285-303 (1998), was particularly helpful in guiding the Family Reading Connections Program in Madison County.

<sup>7</sup> The Promise to Read document is a statement of intent on both the child and family’s behalf to practice daily literacy. It is a simple, one page document with a colorful border and large type that is distributed by the classroom teacher and states:

“Dear Family: Because we know that reading is a powerful tool for life, and families are powerful agents in the educational lives of their children, we are asking every family in grades Kindergarten through third to join us in the Promise to Read. Please return this signed form to your child’s school by \_\_\_\_\_.

I WILL TRY TO READ TO OR WITH MY CHILD FOR 20 MINUTES A DAY

IF I AM UNABLE TO READ WITH MY CHILD, I WILL MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO HAVE ANOTHER CARING ADULT READ TO HIM OR HER.”

The Promise to Read is signed by the classroom teacher, the parent and the child with address and phone number optional for families to fill in.

<sup>8</sup> Parents and community partners need to understand and appreciate the school culture and organizational expectations, particularly of larger districts. The parent facilitators in this story attended a half day workshop based on the publication “Education and Community Building: Connecting Two Worlds,” by Jehl, Jeanne; Blank, Martin J.; and McCloud, Barbara, published in 2001 by the Institute for Educational Leadership with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> Since the passage of *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), schools and community leaders have been working even more diligently to involve parents as equal partners in the educational process. “Boost Family Involvement: How to Make Your Program a Success under the New Title I Guidelines,” by Macfarlane, Eleanor C., Family Literacy Center (1995), has been a valuable resource for the partners in Madison County.

## Acknowledgments

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Alexandria Community Schools  
Anderson Community Schools  
Anderson University  
Elwood Community Schools  
Frankton-Lapel Community Schools  
The Madison County Community Foundation  
South Madison Community Schools

The guidance, patience and encouragement of these partners enabled the Leadership Academy and the 24 parent facilitator leaders to connect with other parents to assist young readers in learning to read.

Thank you for this opportunity to work in partnership with you to make a difference in our school communities!

Lastly, we recognize and appreciate the foresight and faith of Lilly Endowment Inc. of Indianapolis, Ind., in the ability of communities to come together to solve their own problems and for their generous support of the Madison County CAPE (*Community Alliances to Promote Education*) initiative, without which much of this story would not have happened.



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**Nedra Feeley** is an independent consultant specializing in the field of school community collaborations. She holds a bachelors degree in education and a master's degree in social work from Indiana University. Ms. Feeley taught in several urban elementary schools and has been a school social worker for Indianapolis Public Schools. Ms. Feeley developed and implemented a model of school community collaborations for IPS as director of Bridges to Success for United Way of Central Indiana, expanded this model throughout the entire IPS district and onto national recognition with United Way of America. Bridges to Success continues to be a vital school community collaboration serving the students and families in the Indianapolis area and in nine other school communities around the country. Since 1999, Ms. Feeley

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