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By Rick Hulefeld
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There is something unique going on in Covington, something that could matter greatly to the future of the whole city. It is still too soon to know if it will work.

By now some of us have heard that the capacity to read well, a critical component to school success, is primarily built in the early years of a child's life. Children who are frequently read to, talked with and sung to normally begin school poised for school success. The problem is that this understanding of brain development is a relatively new thing. It has not permeated the parenting practices of all families. In short, loving parents who may not have been reared with a lot of books and conversation may still be rearing their children as they were. But the world has changed. Most of the opportunities for a better life require more than a high school degree and therefore higher reading skills.

What does this have to do with the City of Covington? The mayor, Joe Meyer, and the Covington City Commission have rightly seen that Covington children's early reading success impacts taxpayers, schools, businesses, social services, churches, neighborhood organizations, in short, everyone. As the City is the one organization that represents everyone impacted, it made sense for the Commission to call everyone to the table to help more Covington children be successful. While success has multiple components (good health and nutrition, supportive families, effective teachers to name a few), Mayor Meyer knew from his service as Cabinet Secretary of Kentucky's Education and Workforce Cabinet about the early brain development and the essential role that early reading experiences played in children's later school success.

What is the City of Covington doing?

First, the City has reached out to all sectors of the community and invited their participation in helping every child become a competent reader. It understands that libraries, doctors, clinics, neighborhoods, churches, businesses, as well as families and schools have important roles to play. While leading, the City has convened collegially many leaders, seeking their support for children's early reading success.

Second, the city has invested some of its own resources in early success. It has made a timely investment, targeting the reading skills of children ages three to nine when the reading gap between those students who learn to read well and those who don't expands rapidly.

The City has negotiated a three-year license making [Footsteps 2Brilliance](#) and [Clever Kids University](#) free to all residents of Covington.

These apps make thousands of books and literacy activities available to all children. Many businesses, agencies, and the library are offering free wifi that automatically uploads each child's progress.

Covington has hired Ms. Mary Kay Connolly, a former teacher and school counselor, to direct the collaborative effort and train teachers and child care workers in how to use F2B/CKU in their classrooms. Both public and parochial schools are using the apps in their classrooms. By June of 2019, children using the apps during the first year were exposed to over 15 million more words, read 46,000 books, and made up almost 16,000 of their own stories. Ms. Connolly has also distributed 3000 books at child care centers, city pools, neighborhood events, and through the Housing Authority. All these efforts help build the literacy environment that each successful reader needs.

Third, Covington hired a marketing firm to create and implement a communication campaign to promote early literacy as a community value. Posters announcing Covington's early reading initiative, called Read Ready Covington, are ubiquitous. Metal signs with a letter and a picture are hung on street signs all over the city. www.readreadycovington.com has



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been launched. A giant mural at C Forward inspires families to read with their children.

Staff is continually meeting with neighborhood associations, parent groups, ministers, and civic organizations inviting them to spread the word about the importance of early literacy experiences. Many champions and ambassadors have stepped up to carry the message to the families that they serve. Many more are needed.

When COVID-19 shut down all schools, agencies, and public libraries, fortunately Covington's PreK-3rd-grade children and teachers were already enrolled in Footsteps and Clever Kids. Many were already familiar with the learning format and content, making it easier for teachers to include the tools as part of NTI lessons. Since August 1, 2019, collectively Covington children have been exposed

to over 28 million words, 91,500 books, and 90,950 skill development games- nearly half of this usage during the school shutdowns and NTI. In addition, 1600 storybooks and hundreds of sidewalk learning games have been distributed to families, along with walking literacy tours; all of these resources show Covington is taking early literacy improvement seriously.



Others helping too

The City of Covington is not alone in facilitating early reading success in Northern Kentucky. For example, the Erlanger/Elsmere School District, the Erlanger and Elsmere City governments and the United Way's Success by 6 have been bringing together the early learning providers in Erlanger to help more young students be prepared for kindergarten. The City of Newport has helped Newport Schools make Footsteps2Brilliance available to all families in Newport. Covington Partners, a broad collaboration of multiple service agencies, supported by the United Way and Strive, is addressing multiple factors including early reading that impact kindergarten readiness.

Across Kentucky only about 50% of the children entering public kindergarten are screened ready on Kentucky's mandated measure. Last year the number of Kentucky's 3rd graders who attained the level of "proficient" was 54%.

The rewards to a community that helps even 10% more of its young students complete high school and attain a postsecondary certificate or degree is enormous. According to the most recent census, students who complete a postsecondary program will earn 1.1 million dollars more than students who don't. This lifetime increase in earnings changes the lives of the students, the lives of their future family, and supports the livelihood of many others in the community.

Cities that understand that early reading success requires all members of the community to play their role, not just families and schools, may avoid the high cost of remediation, grade retention, social services, loss of payroll taxes, etc. The City of Covington has reached out to all the key players, initiated a timely strategy whose impact can be easily measured, and is attempting to build early literacy into the parenting culture of many of its citizens. It is building a model that could be replicated in many other places. Many members of the community are already involved.

Will more businesses, churches, schools, social services, and civic organizations help families rear more effective readers? The work is right. The stakes are high. Many more champions are needed. Will you help? Please Contact Mary Kay Connolly 859-292-2301 or mkconnolly@covingtoky.gov

