

EDUCATION

Read Ready Kentucky offers science-backed program to families for free



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In the Northern Kentucky city of Covington, literacy isn't saved just for school.

It's a communitywide value.

Free libraries dot neighborhood sidewalks and business bookshelves. Children develop early reading skills through interactive murals and kid-friendly walking tours. Students, teachers, parents and anyone living within the city's boundaries have access to a free bilingual reading app.

Covington's commitment to early literacy could serve as one example of how local communities can play a role in resolving the massive reading struggles burdening the state, which The Courier Journal detailed in its recent investigation, *Between the Lines*.

Investigation *Between the Lines*: Why Kentucky's kids can't read and who's to blame

Before the pandemic, more than 150,000 K-12 students were not proficient readers. Spring 2022 test results show that number has grown to roughly 180,000.

"There are some things that schools alone can't do," Covington Mayor Joseph Meyer said. "We want to give our youngest all the support we can do to help them lead meaningful, productive lives."

Covington's comprehensive literacy effort is called "Read Ready Covington." City government, schools, libraries, childcare centers, local businesses and the public health department each play a role.

The initiative focuses on children from birth through the third grade. It launched in 2018.

At the time, just a third of Covington's kindergarteners were entering school prepared to learn. It was a major concern for Meyer, who served as secretary of the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet from 2009-13.

"You don't want to tag a kid a lifetime failure when he or she is 5 years old," said Meyer.

Covington's work has already inspired a new statewide initiative.

“Read Ready Kentucky” launched this month under the leadership of Miss Kentucky 2022 Hannah Edelen, a former middle school teacher for Covington Independent Public Schools, one of the most impoverished school systems in the state.

The effort, which coincides with National Family Literacy Month, is making parts of the reading app used by Covington free to families across the state throughout November. Families can access the free reading materials at <https://www.footsteps2brilliance.com/kentucky/>.

The app, Footsteps2Brilliance, is aligned to the Science of Reading, a vast body of research showing how children learn to read. It provides practice in the five major areas of literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

The app teaches phonics skills taught explicitly and systematically, according to the company.

An estimated 60% of children need this type of phonics instruction to become proficient readers, research has shown.

Data from the app shows student achievement among Covington children increased in each of the five components of literacy during the 2021-22 school year. Children read more than 200 million words.

Edelen, 24, chose literacy as her platform based on her experiences as both a teacher and a student.

"It is critical that families have access to high-quality materials that are evidence-based and support improvement in literacy both inside and outside of school," said Edelen, author of the 2022 children's book "Hank the Horse and the Case of the Missing Eggs!"

Though the pandemic has made it challenging to measure results, Meyer said Read Ready Covington is having a positive impact on both kids and their caregivers.

More: An 'exhausting and expensive journey': What Kentucky parents should know to help kids read

It's helping parents realize they have "parent power," added Director Mary Kay Connelly.

"When families thrive, communities thrive," she said.

You can read The Courier Journal's full Between the Lines investigation at <https://www.courier-journal.com/betweenthelines>.

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