

3,000 Struggling Readers:

**How High-Impact,
Small-Group Tutoring
Is Closing the Literacy
Gap in Indianapolis**

DECEMBER 2025



The Problem: Indianapolis' Literacy Gap

Being able to read early in school can make or break a student's long-term success. According to a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation¹, **third-grade literacy predicts academic outcomes, high school graduation, and lifetime earning potential** – critical markers for breaking the cycle of poverty and leading a thriving life.

By 2031, nearly three-quarters of jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education or training². That means low reading proficiency in elementary school will have long-term consequences for both students and the workforce.

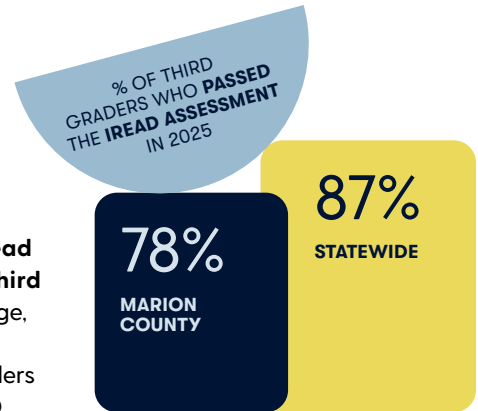


The Solution: Circle City Readers

To ensure every student has a strong start – and to ensure our city is poised for a strong future – **Indianapolis must make sure every third grader reads on grade level.**



Circle City Readers partner schools are located across Marion County.



Across Marion County, **3,000 students can't read proficiently by third grade.** On average, 78% of Marion County third graders passed the IREAD assessment in 2025, compared with 87% statewide. In Indiana, where students can be retained in third grade if they fail IREAD³, nearly one in four Marion County students is at risk for long-term academic challenges.

That's where Circle City Readers comes in. Circle City Readers was created to close the literacy gap for Marion County's youngest learners who are struggling the most with reading through high-impact, small-group tutoring. With an initial \$1.2 million investment championed by Mayor Joe Hogsett and approved by the Indianapolis City-County Council through American Rescue Plan Act funds, the program began as a pilot in Spring 2023 before expanding to 10 participating schools across Indianapolis.

Since its inception, Circle City Readers has served **more than 750 public school students** in grades K–3, driving measurable, transformative results. **Every participating student advanced from where they started**, and across both years, Circle City Readers **cut the share of students reading far below grade level by more than 20 percentage points** – while doubling or tripling the share reading on grade level. These outcomes demonstrate what's possible when students receive the right support: **every child can make meaningful progress in reading and gain the confidence to succeed.**



The Future: Expanding Proven Impact Across Marion County

By serving 500 students annually, Circle City Readers is already changing outcomes for one-sixth of the 3,000 Marion County students who can't yet read at grade level. Next, we aim to expand Circle City Readers to ensure that every third grader in Indianapolis can read – and succeed – in school and beyond.

With continued partnership and support from the public and philanthropic communities, we can scale this evidence-based intervention to close Indianapolis's literacy gap once and for all – helping children catch up, keep up, and soar ahead.

Principal Kevin McMahan reads to one of his students at Jonathan Jennings Elementary 109, a Circle City Readers partner school.





Circle City Readers aims to eliminate the literacy gap for K-3 students in Marion County through high-impact, small-group tutoring so that every Indianapolis student has the foundational skills needed to thrive in school and beyond. We serve the public school students most at-risk for not meeting grade-level literacy goals from the highest-need zip codes in Marion County, where poverty rates often exceed 30%.



Circle City Readers delivers **research-backed, high-impact tutoring** that helps students learn faster and achieve more⁴. Our model rests on a simple truth: when struggling readers receive consistent, personalized reading intervention, they make extraordinary gains.

Combining Proven Instruction with Personal Connection

At the heart of Circle City Readers are two powerful forces – small-group literacy instruction and consistent relationships with caring adults – which dramatically change reading outcomes for students. Our approach is rooted in the *Science of Reading* and leverages five best practices, including:



Small-group, in-person learning. Students receive targeted instruction with a ratio of between one and three students per tutor, accelerating foundational reading growth.



Evidence-based curriculum. The program, created by Amplify Tutoring, ensures lessons are structured, sequential, and data-informed. A simple, effective curriculum allows tutors to tailor lessons to each student's specific needs.



Integrated scheduling. Sessions occur during the school day when all students are working in small groups – without disrupting whole-group instruction.



Consistent mentorship. Our tutors build relationships that fuel both learning and confidence. Students meet with the same tutor three to four times each week, strengthening trust and motivation.



Community-based tutors. Adults from local neighborhoods bring cultural understanding and authentic connection to their work. They are provided comprehensive training and resources – no teaching background required.

Creating Accessibility for All

Circle City Readers removes the barriers that too often limit access, making participation for families and schools seamless. Because the program is free for families and schools, no student or school is excluded due to cost. The program occurs during the school day, eliminating the need for transportation and time after school to receive reading support. We also recruit, hire, train, and manage all tutors – allowing schools to focus on teaching while we deliver results.

Together, these elements create a model that is both effective and sustainable – one that transforms struggling readers into confident learners and builds stronger school communities in the process.



“Students require small-group or individual attention to catch up, but ongoing budget cuts have made this increasingly difficult. Because of this, Circle City Readers is one of the great resources in our school.”

KEVIN MCMAHAN, PRINCIPAL
JONATHAN JENNINGS ELEMENTARY 109


“We’re able to have that one-on-one experience with them. Anything that they’re struggling with in the classroom, we can focus on that in our groups instead of the usual 20 to 30 students in the whole classroom.”

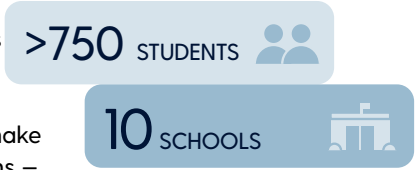
MARTHA GARCIA, TUTOR
CIRCLE CITY READERS



Closing Literacy Gaps Citywide

Across participating schools, Circle City Readers has produced remarkable growth in literacy achievement – **yielding outcomes that are measurable and meaningful for the students who began the year the most behind in reading.**

In just two years, Circle City Readers has enabled more than **>750 STUDENTS**  **750 students** across **10 public schools** to make significant reading gains – closing literacy gaps across the city. The most recent cohort, who began below or well below their peers, **outperformed students in Indianapolis Public Schools and the township districts of Perry, Pike and Wayne on the IREAD exam and nearly matched the county average.**

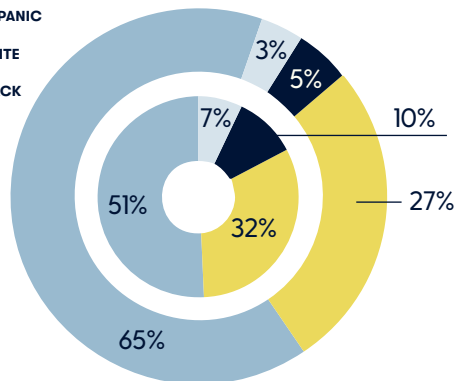
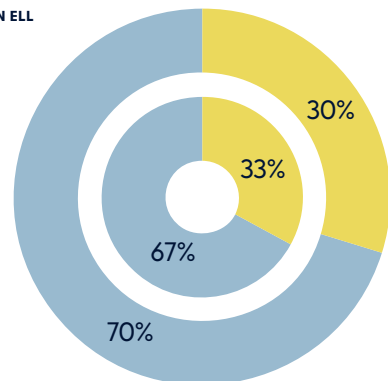
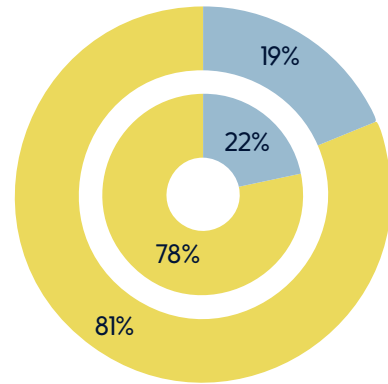
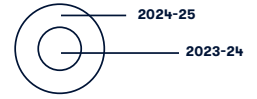


CCR PARTICIPANTS ARE PREDOMINANTLY STUDENTS OF COLOR AND ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED

Demographics for both years of the program looked similar. In 2023-24, Circle City Readers provided 500 students with high-impact, small-group tutoring. Within this cohort, 90% identified as non-white, 78% as on free and reduced lunch, and 33% as English language learners.

In the 2024-25 cohort, Circle City Readers served 450 students, of whom 95% identified as non-white, 81% as on free and reduced lunch, and 30% as English language learners.

Circle City Readers Cohort Demographics



"I'm very thankful that Jonathan Jennings was able to come in with the Circle City Readers and bring a tutor to help. I see the growth with Circle City Readers helping him. It's amazing to me that in just that little time you see the growth in your child."

JAMES CARADINE, PARENT OF SECOND GRADE CIRCLE CITY READERS PARTICIPANT
JONATHAN JENNINGS ELEMENTARY 109



PARTICIPANTS MADE SIGNIFICANT GAINS ON IREAD IN 2024-25

Circle City Readers participants, all of whom were identified as some of the most behind among peers in reading, outperformed all third graders in districts including IPS, MSD of Perry Township, MSD of Pike Township, and MSD of Wayne Township on the 2025 IREAD exam. They also nearly caught up to the county average.

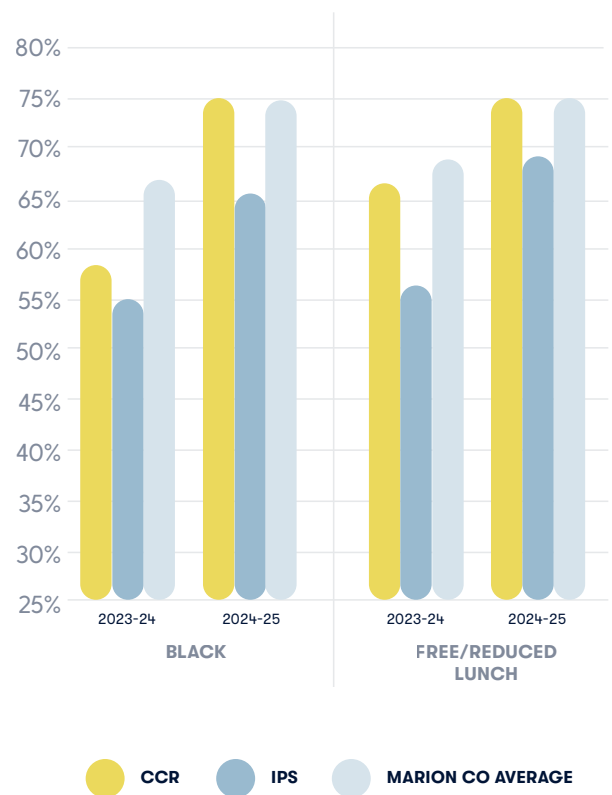
PARTICIPANTS OUTPERFORMED STUDENTS ACROSS RACE AND INCOME GROUPS

In both years of the program, **Black students and those from low-income households in Circle City Readers outpaced IPS students** within their respective subgroups. In 2024-25, they also **caught up to Marion County students** within those subgroups, demonstrating that **CCR is closing literacy gaps citywide**.

Overall IREAD Exam Pass Rates



IREAD Exam Pass Rates by Subgroup



Students who participate in Circle City Readers are those identified by their teachers as being most at-risk for not meeting grade-level reading standards by the end of the academic year.



SIGNIFICANT READING GROWTH AMONG STUDENTS WHO STARTED FURTHEST BEHIND

Every student's progress is tracked using DIBELS, a Science of Reading-based assessment, at the start, middle, and end of the year. **Students who received a full year of tutoring (20+ weeks) made the strongest gains.**

Of the students who started the year well below benchmark, 20% narrowed their reading-level gap, and another 20% reached full grade-level proficiency. **In both years of the program, 40% of those who began furthest behind made major strides toward long-term reading success.**

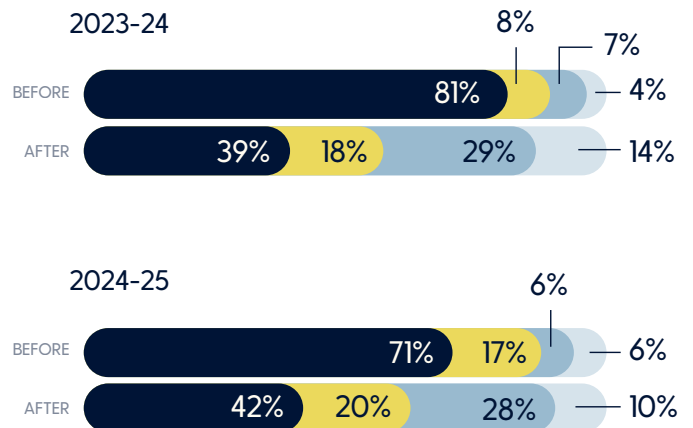


EARLY LEARNERS SHOWED THE LARGEST GROWTH IN READING PROFICIENCY

Kindergarteners showed the most dramatic growth of all participants. **In 2023–24, more than half of those who began the year furthest behind made remarkable strides in reading progress.** The following year, 2024–25, nearly 30% of kindergarten students who started well below benchmark finished the year significantly closer to grade-level reading – proof that early, focused support can change a child's learning trajectory from the very start

IN BOTH YEARS OF THE PROGRAM, 40% OF THOSE WHO BEGAN FURTHEST BEHIND MADE MAJOR STRIDES TOWARD LONG-TERM READING SUCCESS.

Reading Improvement for Kindergarteners Starting Well Below Benchmark





FEWER STRUGGLING READERS, MORE ON-TRACK STUDENTS

In just two years, Circle City Readers has cut the share of students reading far below grade level by more than 20 percentage points – **helping hundreds of children move closer to grade-level reading.**

Over the 2023–24 school year, the share of students reading far below grade level dropped dramatically – **from 73% to 45%** – while those reading at or above grade level nearly tripled, climbing from **13% to 35%**.

The following year, 2024–25, continued that momentum. The percentage of students far behind in reading declined again, from **66% to 44%**, and the proportion meeting or exceeding grade-level expectations rose from **21% to 35%**.

These consistent gains among the students struggling the most in reading are rarely seen without targeted, evidence-based intervention.

Each percentage point represents a student gaining skills, confidence, and the belief that they can thrive in school – and beyond.

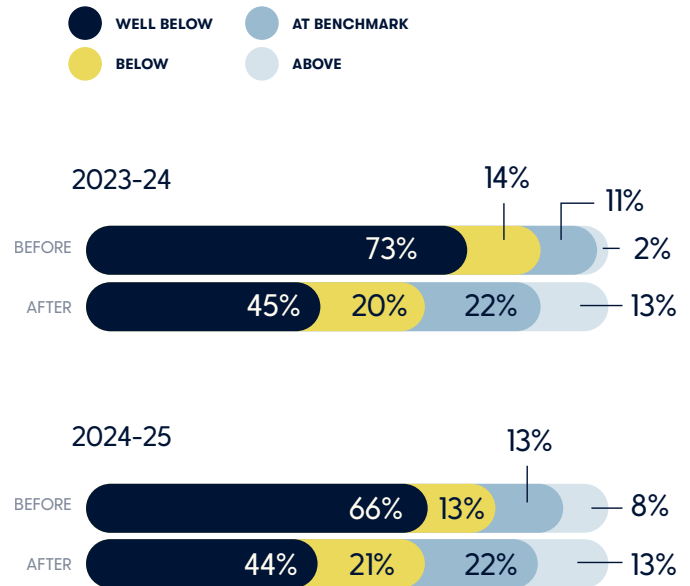
Transforming Student Trajectories

Circle City Readers isn't just helping children learn to read – it's changing their trajectory.

Research from the National Center for Education Statistics⁵ shows that students who struggle with reading early on are more likely to struggle with behavior later in school. It is not surprising, therefore, that **Circle City Readers students display noticeably better behavior.**

Additionally, as the growing crisis of chronic absenteeism impacts academic outcomes, Circle City Readers has **proven to increase attendance among participants**, with an attendance rate of 91.5%, outpacing that of their peers. These positive impacts on students not only change their lives, they have a ripple effect on communities, the local economy, and the workforce.

Overall Reading Improvement for Participants, 2023–2025



Strengthening Schools and Communities

Beyond literacy and behavioral gains, Circle City Readers strengthens schools by **lightening teachers' workloads and forging deeper community connections.**

Teachers need support now more than ever. By hiring tutors who work in schools consistently, Circle City Readers alleviates the burden on educators while growing the pipeline of talent in education. Teachers appreciate having another source of quality instruction and note that small groups make a big difference, helping prevent students from falling through the cracks. Three Circle City Readers tutors have even gone on to become educators at their placement schools.

Family and community investment in schools has been shown to improve student achievement and attendance, as well as boost empathy for students and reputation of the school at the community level⁶. Circle City Readers builds these bridges by engaging community members directly with schools near them.



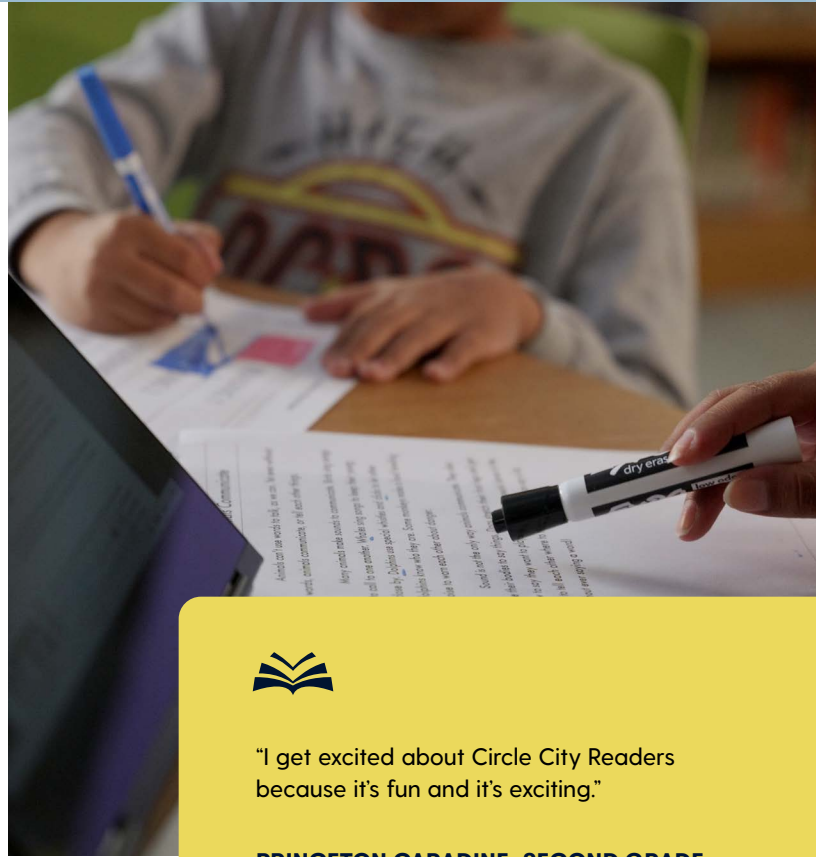
An initial \$1.2 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds were invested to cover program administration and staffing costs. An additional \$1 million from the City of Indianapolis will fully fund the program through the 2025-26 school year at 10 schools.

According to the Institute for Policy Research⁷, similar tutoring programs cost \$3,500–\$4,300 per student, while **Circle City Readers delivers comparable or greater results for about \$2,000 – roughly half the cost.**

With just two full-time staff members, overhead is minimal: 90% of all costs go directly to tutor and staff salaries, including wages for 40 locally-based tutors.

As pandemic-era funding sunsets, philanthropic partnership, alongside continued public support, will be essential to ensuring every student in Marion County can access the literacy support they need – regardless of income or school funding.

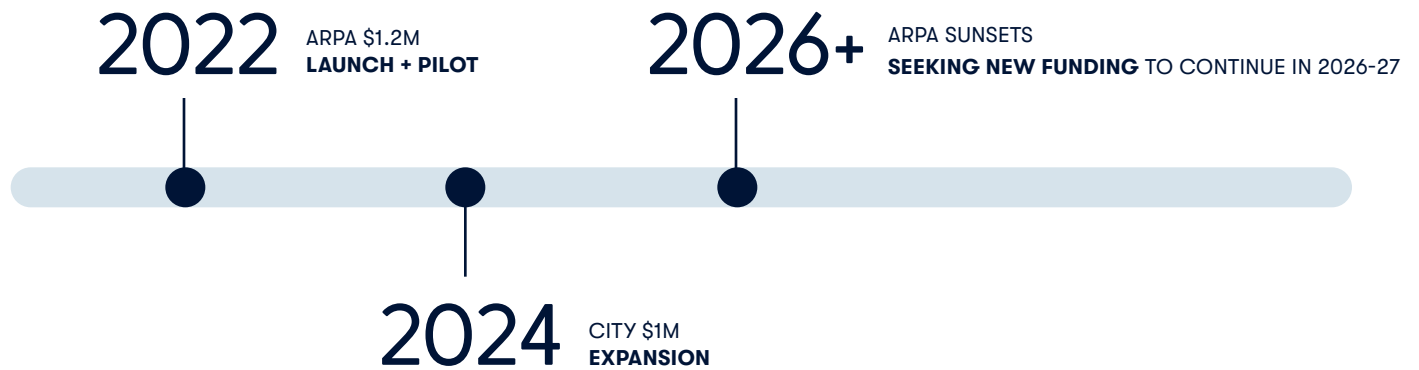
With the right investment, **Circle City Readers can equip every Marion County student with the tools to succeed in reading – and make Indianapolis a model for educational equity.**



"I get excited about Circle City Readers because it's fun and it's exciting."

**PRINCETON CARADINE, SECOND GRADE
CIRCLE CITY READERS PARTICIPANT**

JONATHAN JENNINGS ELEMENTARY 109





Together, We Can Build a City of Readers



Research from UNESCO⁸, the National Institutes of Health⁹, and Yale University¹⁰ all point to the same conclusion: **students who learn to read early are far more likely to graduate, pursue higher education, and thrive.** Without such strategic interventions, students are unlikely to catch up, especially those who face barriers outside the classroom.

The data is clear: Circle City Readers works. Through targeted, small-group tutoring – one of the most effective ways to accelerate learning – the program is helping hundreds of Marion County students build strong reading skills and gain the confidence to succeed, while closing citywide achievement gaps.

Circle City Readers is a success story for Indianapolis – a program that launched quickly to meet a local need, scaled efficiently with modest funding, and delivered measurable results within just two years.

But this is only the beginning. With sustained investment, we can:

- Expand to serve every one of the 3,000 Marion County students not yet reading proficiently,
- Close the literacy gap citywide, and
- Build a model for educational achievement and talent development nationwide.

Together, we can make Indianapolis a city where every child reads with confidence and has an equal opportunity to thrive, no matter their race, income, zip code, or home language.



¹ Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* (Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).

² Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, *The Future of the U.S. Workforce: Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University CEW, 2023).

³ Chalkbeat Indiana, "Indiana's IREAD Results Show Persistent Reading Gaps," *Chalkbeat Indiana*, May 2025.

⁴ Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), *The Transformative Potential of High-Impact Tutoring* (Cambridge, MA: J-PAL North America, 2020).

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *Reading and Behavioral Outcomes: A Longitudinal Study of Early Literacy and School Adjustment* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

⁶ Hanover Research, *The Impact of Family and Community Engagement on Student Achievement* (Arlington, VA: Hanover Research, 2025).

⁷ Institute for Policy Research, *Evaluating the Cost and Effectiveness of Tutoring Programs for Early Literacy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2021).

⁸ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2025: Literacy and Learning for All* (Paris: UNESCO, 2025).

⁹ National Institutes of Health (NIH), *Early Reading Development and Cognitive Outcomes* (Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2024).

¹⁰ Yale University Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, *The Long-Term Benefits of Early Reading Intervention* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2025).