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TO: Jeff Irwin  
Chair, Board of Commissioners

FROM: Robert E. Guenzel  
County Administrator

DATE: July 18, 2007

SUBJECT: Literacy Coalition

**BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:**

It is requested that the Board of Commissioners create and appoint members to the Washtenaw County Literacy Coalition. The Coalition's charge is to end illiteracy in Washtenaw County.

**BACKGROUND:**

As the National Institute for Literacy states, "the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the National Literacy Act of 1991 define literacy as 'an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.' This is a broader view of literacy than just an individual's ability to read, the more traditional concept of literacy."<sup>1</sup>

Research has shown, and common sense tells us, several key things about literacy:

- *Literacy is fundamental.* Without proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking English, even the basics of daily life – transportation, medication, job-hunting, and shopping, for instance – present a daunting challenge.
- *Literacy starts early.* Studies have shown that 50% of children born to illiterate parents will remain illiterate themselves. Further, if a child has not learned to read by third grade, when schools stop teaching "how to read," that child has a dramatically reduced chance of gaining literacy skills through schooling alone.

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute for Literacy, [http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/reading\\_facts.html](http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/reading_facts.html), 09/13/06

- *Literacy is an essential cornerstone to the foundation of lifelong success.* Washtenaw Literacy serves over 1,400 adults per year in Washtenaw County alone, and must turn away potential clients due to lack of resources. It is estimated that up to 20% of adults nation-wide are functionally illiterate.
- *Literacy affects our society in disproportionate ways.* There is a strong correlation between income and education, which is a proxy measure for literacy. Children living in poor families will have heard 32 million fewer words than children living in professional families. When one considers that 31 million people (or 11.3%) nationwide live below the poverty line, and that this proportion rises dramatically for African-American, Hispanic, and female-headed households, the implications are staggering.

The data are unequivocal that literacy contributes to success in every aspect of life, and that even in Washtenaw County, 12% of adults – or 27,000 individuals – struggle with literacy. Yet, the preliminary report of the Washtenaw County Community Needs assessment,<sup>2</sup> the topic of literacy is hardly mentioned, and is certainly not identified as a priority need in the community.

### **DISCUSSION:**

Under the leadership of Commissioners Ronnie Peterson and Leah Gunn, Washtenaw County Administration convened a small working group of stakeholders and community leaders in the fall of 2006 to evaluate the growing problem of illiteracy. Valuable discussions and data gathering occurred during the ensuing months, and the time for action has come.

In order to give this working group the legitimacy and stature required to address such a serious problem, it is proposed that the Board of Commissioners formally create a Literacy Coalition. The ultimate goal of the Coalition is to end illiteracy in Washtenaw County.

The Coalition will be tasked with creating a plan to achieve that goal. Some potential objectives of that plan have been identified:

- Conduct a baseline assessment for actual literacy rates in Washtenaw County, parsed by age and other population determinants
  - *The Community Collaborative of Washtenaw County (CCWC) has committed to including this evaluation in their next Community Needs Assessment*
- Take inventory of all existing literacy resources and their service populations
  - *A database has been initiated, and will be maintained as we move forward*

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<sup>2</sup> Study conducted by the United Way and partners, released fall 2006

- Saturate the community with an urgent message that illiteracy is a crisis; shift the paradigm beyond a passive sense of “literacy is good”
- Establish widespread understanding among human service agencies that literacy is a foundational issue for their clients’ overall well-being
- Implement consistent, ongoing training for human service providers to enable staff to identify illiteracy in their existing service populations; provide resources to enable referrals and/or other supports to attack the problem
- Build capacity the non-profit sector to enable these resources to be available – in terms of direct service provision as well as a “train the trainer” strategy
- Conduct outreach to all populations, not just human service agencies’ clients, to make literacy resources available to all
- Aggressively identify/recruit partners and resources to champion literacy everywhere, including within the school systems
- Provide regular progress updates to the Board of Commissioners

This initiative will be long-term, and require a consistency of effort and an urgency of purpose. Washtenaw County is fortunate to be positioned to take advantage of the leadership and resources required to sustain such an effort: the members of the ad hoc working group have already indicated their willingness to participate in the Literacy Coalition.

The Coalition shall be comprised of members from a variety of sectors, including academia, government, not-for-profit, government, libraries, faith-based organizations, and businesses. Proposed membership on the Coalition is as follows:

**Individual**

Bill Abernethy  
 Anya Abramzon  
 Cara Belkofer  
 Jesse Bernstein  
 Donna DeButts  
 Pastor Phil Ferrell  
 Bob Guenzel  
 Leah Gunn  
 James Hawkins  
 Freman Hendrix  
 Diane Keller  
 Julie McFarland  
 Verna McDaniel  
 Bill Miller  
 Sian Owen-Cruise  
 Josie Parker  
 Keith Peters

**Representing**

Washtenaw Community College  
 Jewish Family Services  
 Reach Out & Read  
 Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce  
 Ypsilanti District Library  
 Ministerial Alliance  
 Washtenaw County Administration, *Chair*  
 Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners  
 Ypsilanti Public Schools  
 Eastern Michigan University  
 Ypsilanti Chamber of Commerce  
 McNaughton and Gunn  
 Washtenaw County Administration  
 Washtenaw Intermediate School District  
 Washtenaw Success by Six Initiative  
 Ann Arbor District Library  
 Washtenaw County Workforce Development Board

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Joanne Pierson          | University of Michigan                      |
| Ronnie Peterson         | Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners     |
| Chris Roberts           | Washtenaw Literacy                          |
| Mike Scholl             | Community Collaborative of Washtenaw County |
| Peg Talburt             | James A. & Faith Knight Foundation          |
| Sandy Williams          | Family Learning Institute                   |
| <i>To be determined</i> | Washtenaw Association of School Boards      |

**Washtenaw County Staff Representatives:**

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Ellen Clement        | Public Health                              |
| Patricia Horne McGee | Head Start                                 |
| Trenda Rusher        | Employment Training and Community Services |
| Kerry Sheldon        | Administration                             |
| Mary Udoji           | Library Learning Resource Center           |
| Nancy Thelen         | MSU Extension                              |

The Coalition shall meet on a monthly basis at the outset, with the first meeting to take place beginning in September, on the third Monday of the month. The initial term of membership shall last eighteen months. Many opportunities will arise for additional parties to join the Coalition and/or working groups. Also, a website will be developed to facilitate communications.

**IMPACT ON PERSONNEL:**

None.

**IMPACT ON BUDGET:**

None. Resource allocation recommendations will be included in the plan that the Coalition develops, and incidental costs associated with the plan's development will be absorbed within the existing County budget.

**IMPACT ON INDIRECT COSTS:**

None.

**IMPACT ON OTHER COUNTY DEPARTMENTS OR OUTSIDE AGENCIES:**

None.

**CONFORMITY TO COUNTY POLICIES:**

This action conforms with County policies, and supports Guiding Principles # 4 (Root Causes) and Guiding Principle # 7 (Intergovernmental and Intersectoral Cooperation and Collaboration).

**ATTACHMENTS/APPENDICES:**

Resolution

A RESOLUTION CREATING AND APPOINTING MEMBERS TO THE  
WASHTENAW COUNTY LITERACY COALITION, WHOSE CHARGE IS TO  
END ILLITERACY IN WASHTENAW COUNTY, FOR ROUGHLY EIGHTEEN  
MONTH TERMS ENDING DECEMBER 31, 2008

WASHTENAW COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

JULY 18, 2007

WHEREAS, literacy is a foundational cornerstone of success for every aspect of life, and yet an estimated 27,000 adults in Washtenaw County struggle with basic literacy skills; and

WHEREAS, under the leadership of Commissioners Ronnie Peterson and Leah Gunn, Washtenaw County Administration convened a small working group of stakeholders and community leaders in the fall of 2006 to evaluate the growing problem of illiteracy; and

WHEREAS, this group has met several times to gather and share information, identify stakeholders, and begin developing a plan for action; and

WHEREAS, in order to give this working group the legitimacy and stature required to address such a serious problem, it is proposed that the Board of Commissioners formally create a Literacy Coalition; and

WHEREAS, the Coalition shall be comprised of members from a variety of sectors, including academia, government, not-for-profit, government, libraries, faith-based organizations, and businesses; and

WHEREAS, many individuals from these sectors have already stepped forward and indicated their willingness to serve;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners hereby creates the Washtenaw Literacy Coalition, and charges that Coalition with the development of a plan to end illiteracy in Washtenaw County.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the membership of the Coalition shall be comprised of the following representatives:

**Individual**

Bill Abernethy  
Anya Abramzon  
Cara Belkofer  
Jesse Bernstein  
Donna DeButts

**Representing**

Washtenaw Community College  
Jewish Family Services  
Reach Out & Read  
Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce  
Ypsilanti District Library

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Pastor Phil Ferrell     | Ministerial Alliance                          |
| Bob Guenzel             | Washtenaw County Administration, <i>Chair</i> |
| Leah Gunn               | Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners       |
| James Hawkins           | Ypsilanti Public Schools                      |
| Freman Hendrix          | Eastern Michigan University                   |
| Diane Keller            | Ypsilanti Chamber of Commerce                 |
| Julie McFarland         | McNaughton and Gunn                           |
| Verna McDaniel          | Washtenaw County Administration               |
| Bill Miller             | Washtenaw Intermediate School District        |
| Sian Owen-Cruise        | Washtenaw Success by Six Initiative           |
| Josie Parker            | Ann Arbor District Library                    |
| Keith Peters            | Washtenaw County Workforce Development Board  |
| Joanne Pierson          | University of Michigan                        |
| Ronnie Peterson         | Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners       |
| Chris Roberts           | Washtenaw Literacy                            |
| Mike Scholl             | Community Collaborative of Washtenaw County   |
| Peg Talburtt            | James A. & Faith Knight Foundation            |
| Sandy Williams          | Family Learning Institute                     |
| <i>To be determined</i> | Washtenaw Association of School Boards        |

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that Washtenaw County staff representatives will also serve on the Coalition, as follows:

**Washtenaw County Staff Representatives:**

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Ellen Clement        | Public Health                              |
| Patricia Horne McGee | Head Start                                 |
| Trenda Rusher        | Employment Training and Community Services |
| Kerry Sheldon        | Administration                             |
| Mary Udoji           | Library Learning Resource Center           |
| Nancy Thelen         | MSU Extension                              |

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Coalition will meet on a monthly basis at the outset, beginning in September.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the initial term of membership shall be roughly eighteen months, ending on December 31, 2008.