

Success Story: The Between the Lions Preschool Literacy Initiative

Mississippi Public Broadcasting

How can a family of furry, friendly lions change the face of literacy in the state of Mississippi and beyond? Father Theo, mother Cleo, and children Lionel and Leona, whose habitat is the local library, have been making strides since January 2005 through an effort to bring a centers-based curriculum providing early word recognition and comprehension activities for three and four-year-olds in 95 child care center classrooms across the state. The lion family is featured on *Between the Lions*, an Emmy award winning production of Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB), WGBH Boston and Sirius Thinking, Ltd. New York. Filmed at MPB's Jackson studios, *Between the Lions* has been broadcast daily since 2000 on PBS stations across the nation and is designed to encourage children to "get wild about reading."

The *Between the Lions* (BTL) Preschool Literacy Initiative is funded in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Education's Ready to Learn grant, and the Barksdale Reading Institute. The Initiative targets child care centers in the Jackson area (Hinds, Madison, and Rankin Counties) serving children primarily from low-income households. Currently, 1771 children in 73 early childhood centers have participated in the program, allowing children to view episodes in class and engage in before and after viewing activities designed to improve language and social skills, as well as math and science. "Active" viewing is more than just watching the featured episode. Children rotate between hands-on learning centers designed to instruct in creative ways, and they sing songs, learn poems and read books all based on the week's theme.



Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy, MPB and Shelia Brown Robinson, MPB Early Childhood Specialist

Literacy



Bobbie Courtney, Director of Visions Academy, Brandon, Mississippi

"It works because they learn through play. They are not just watching TV; they are engaged in what is being said."

Bobbie Courtney, Director of Visions Academy, Brandon, Mississippi



Elana Tate, Director of New Jerusalem School and Jeannie Smith, Preschool teacher

"Teachers welcome television into the classroom not as a babysitter but as an educational tool," says Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy at MPB. "When it's strategically designed to educate, inform and instruct, then it can be very useful in the classroom." Classrooms become livelier, and interaction among teacher and classmates is encouraged. "You want them to learn by having fun and being energetic," says Shelia Brown Robinson, one of three MPB Early Childhood Specialists who serve as mentors to classroom teachers. "*Between the Lions* has brought that excitement into the classroom. Our children are now running to practice writing their name."

The *Between the Lions* curriculum is comprised of three components. The actual viewing of the *Between the Lions* episodes in the classroom allows children to interact with each other and the teacher. Supplemental materials such as songs, poem charts, and books reinforce the message presented during the featured episode, and the mentoring component provides support for classroom teachers.

Bobbie Courtney, the Director of Visions Academy in Brandon, has seen the positive benefits of using the *BTL* curriculum. "It works because they learn through play. They are not just watching TV; they are engaged in what is being said." Courtney was a classroom teacher in another participating child care center and brought the curriculum to Visions Academy when she became the director there. She says the key to its success comes from the hands-on learning centers. "If they [the students] don't get it in one center, it's used in another way. So, one of these areas will be attractive to them if not all."

Gone are the days when children sit quietly on the carpet waiting for the teacher to instruct them. A

Between the Lions classroom is active, and creativity and independence are encouraged. Elana Tate, Director of New Jerusalem School in South Jackson says using the hands-on learning center approach has made all the difference. “We were doing things as a whole group, and some kids were left out. It just really touched my heart to see the change. Once we went to centers, it was just unbelievable.” Jeannie Smith, a preschool teacher at New Jerusalem, thinks this approach also boosts a child’s confidence by increasing independence. “Kids get to do their own work, and they want to do it. If they pour a lot of glue on the paper, that’s fine. It’s their work.”

A participating *BTL* classroom teacher receives training in implementing the curriculum, a TV/DVD player for the classroom, 61 children’s books, teacher handbooks with accompanying DVDs, and materials to be used in the classroom; but it is the mentoring component that means the most to the teachers. The MPB Early Childhood Mentors visit classrooms regularly and assist the teachers in daily activities. Mentors spend 96 classroom hours per year and are on call for support. “What we give them [the teachers] is us,” says Robinson. “I might be the mentor, but you’re the teacher. You learn from me, and I’ll learn from you. The kids are just going to get a double dose,” adds Robinson. “Teachers used to give the children a crayon and a piece of paper and say ‘Hey, have fun, but be quiet.’ Now you walk in the room and hear children reciting poems and creating pictures in unique ways. The whole outlook has changed from when we first began.” According to Stevenson, the mentors are important reasons why the classroom climate is changing. “They [the mentors] are not just saying, ‘Here’s the curriculum—here you go,’ but they are assisting teachers throughout the year.”

“I might be the mentor, but you’re the teacher. You learn from me, and I’ll learn from you, and the kids are just going to get a double dose.”

Shelia Brown Robinson, MPB Early Childhood Specialist

Although the MPB Early Childhood Mentors have only been available to 95 child care classrooms in the Jackson area, the *Between the Lions* literacy program itself is spreading across the state thanks to Rotary Clubs who are bringing the *BTL* curriculum to child care centers in central Mississippi. It all started three years ago when Jack Forbus, then Rotary District 6820 Governor, and other Rotarians began to explore avenues to address literacy and high dropout rates in the state. Forbus, a State Farm insurance agent in Starkville, had heard about the



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Between the Lions Preschool Literacy Initiative and was curious to hear more. A meeting in Jackson between MPB staff and Rotary leaders ended in a partnership between the two. "They had the program; we had the desire, so we married up," says Forbus.

Participating Rotary Clubs adopt child care centers and agree to provide \$1500 to implement the *BTL* program. Each center receives a TV/DVD player, curriculum, teaching materials and books to aid them. Teachers are trained by MPB staff, and Mississippi State University's Child Care Resource and Referral Network staff provide technical assistance. Rotarians volunteer their time weekly reading to the children and spending time with them. Following the initial start-up year, Rotarians provide \$300 to each adopted classroom annually for additional classroom materials.

Forbus likes to say that the Rotarians are "the boots on the ground," and believes that finding ways to form unique partnerships such as theirs with MPB is key in improving outcomes for Mississippi's children especially during tough economic times. In recalling the initial meeting with MPB, Forbus remembers, "We thought to ourselves, they [MPB]



Jack Forbus, Literacy Chair, Rotary District 6820

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Jack Forbus, Literacy Chair, Rotary District 6820



Visions Academy preschoolers enjoying lunch with Rankin County Rotary members

have what we want, and we've got what they want, so we voted right there to work together." In three years, the *BTL* Rotary Club Preschool Literacy Initiative has grown from 11 to 26 child care centers.

Child care directors recognize the work that the Rotary Clubs are doing. In Brandon, the Rankin County Rotary Club sponsors Visions Academy. "They sponsor us financially, but they are really involved with us on a much bigger scale," says Bobbie Courtney. She adds that Rotarians representing various careers read to the children regularly and tell them the importance of cultivating a love for reading. "Because of their sponsorship, new doors have been opened for our children to be exposed to things. I am really grateful."



The *BTL* Preschool Literacy Initiative does not stop with the Jackson Metro Project or even the Rotary Initiative. It has spread even farther to public libraries across the state. Because the "lions" live in the local library, there is now a real interest among young viewers in using the local library and finding out what a library can provide. As a third component, MPB established the *BTL* Preschool Literacy Library Project which provided educational resources in 17 Mississippi libraries.



Brandon Cooley



LaTonya Thomas

Literacy

In addition to the enthusiasm garnered by classroom teachers and community volunteers, parents are excited about what the *Between the Lions* curriculum is bringing to the classroom and to the home environment. LaTonya Thomas, whose four-year-old son Brandon Cooley attends New Jerusalem School, appreciates the diverse ways the curriculum is taught. "Brandon has to be active. He's not the average child who will sit down and look at a book." Thomas adds that Brandon's interest in music has been encouraged by incorporating music into the curriculum. Additionally, the program provides support for parents through newsletters which outline practical ways for parents to get involved. "It pushes me," says Thomas. "Family time is important to Brandon versus just sitting and watching TV. He's always reminding me, 'Mama, we have a project to do.'"



Ketina and Kelsey Moore

Kelsey Moore, a first grader at St. Therese School in Jackson, says her love for reading came from her pre-school involvement in *Between the Lions*. Noting that Kelsey has won school reading awards, mother Ketina says the curriculum is a "literacy booster" as well as a vocabulary builder. "It gives them the love and enjoyment of reading. Every night she wants to read before bedtime." She too says that parents look for-



ward to the weekly newsletters for parents. Kelsey's exemplary performance in the classroom is one concrete example that the *Between the Lions* curriculum is working. She's been reading chapter books for two years now and currently reads on a third grade level.

"There are literacy opportunities at every moment."

Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy, MPB

Evaluations of the program indicate that it is a valuable teaching tool. A study by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication found that using the *BTL* curriculum does make a significant impact in reading skills among centers that use it (Piotrowski, Linebarger, and Jennings, 2009). "Our research clearly indicates that the *Between the Lions* Preschool Literacy Initiative curriculum positively impacts vocabulary development, teacher behavior, and literacy environments," said Deborah L. Linebarger, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Communication and Lead Investigator of the study. "We found substantial evidence that children who may be at-risk for reading failure due to economic disadvantages are acquiring necessary early literacy skills." Children were divided into three groups: an experimental group, which was exposed to the *Between the Lions* curriculum; a maintenance group, which had used the curriculum the previous year; and a control group, which was not provided with any *Between the Lions* materials.

The results revealed that children whose teachers utilized the *BTL* curriculum outperformed their peers in the control group on upper case letter identification by 75%, lower case letter identification by nearly 113%, and picture naming skills by 20%. Children's letter sound scores also improved by nearly 300% (Piotrowski, Linebarger, and Jennings, 2009).

Recognizing that Mississippi's literacy "gaps" are often based on income level, the *BTL* initiatives sought from the beginning to fill that gap by providing resources and assistance to child care centers serving children from economically disadvantaged households with the hope that it would spread to individual households. According to MPB's Stevenson, "If children don't get a foundation between the ages of three and four, then they will be behind when they start grade school. Some of these are the same children who will not finish high school because



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they will be behind all their lives.” Stevenson believes that the *Between the Lions* curriculum not only improves the literacy skills of the children enrolled in the child care centers, but also the entire family. “Normally you would say that the parents should be driving literacy within the home environment. However, for some of these children who come from homes where the parents may not have a high school diploma or may not understand how to read aloud to their children, now because of *Between the Lions*, the children are driving the literacy in their home environments. The children are going in the classroom, learning, and then getting their parents excited about it at home.”

The home to school connection is critical in the efforts to improve reading skills in the state. Making parents aware of the importance of reading to their children, as well as interacting with them, are simple ways that the *Between the Lions* initiative can be replicated. Children who are watching *BTL* in class are coming home at night and encouraging their parents to read and build their vocabulary skills. “There are literacy opportunities at every moment,” says Stevenson who says children can learn anywhere anytime if parents are willing to get creative. Identifying letters of the alphabet while doing grocery shopping is just one suggestion. Stevenson believes that the foundations built in *Between the Lions* can be extended in many ways in homes and communities across the state.

“The secret is not just the show. It’s not just a television series, not just a curriculum that has been developed, but it’s a combination of all these things to make an impact on teaching services and also child outcomes,” says Stevenson. “Why should we wait until they are ten? We have to do it now. We cannot afford to wait.”



*“Why should we wait til they’re ten?
We’ve got to do it now. We can’t afford to wait.”*

Maggie Stevenson, Director of Early Childhood Literacy, MPB

Between the Lions Preschool Literacy Library Project

Participating Pilot Libraries:

- Alcorn Co., Corinth Library
- Benton Co., Hickory Flat Public Library
- Claiborne Co., Harriette Person Memorial Library
- Coahoma Co., Carnegie Public Library
- Covington Co., Seminary Public Library
- DeSoto Co., M.R. Davis Library
- Forrest Co., Hattiesburg Library
- Hinds Co., Eudora Welty Library
- Jackson Co., Pascagoula Public Library
- Lee Co., Lee County Library
- Lowndes Co., Columbus Public Library
- Pearl River Co., Margaret Reed Crosby Memorial Library
- Pontotoc Co., Pontotoc County Library
- Rankin Co., G.Chastaine Flynt Memorial Library
- Sharkey Co., Sharkey-Issaquena County Library
- Sunflower Co., Henry Seymour Library
- Wayne Co., Wayne County Library

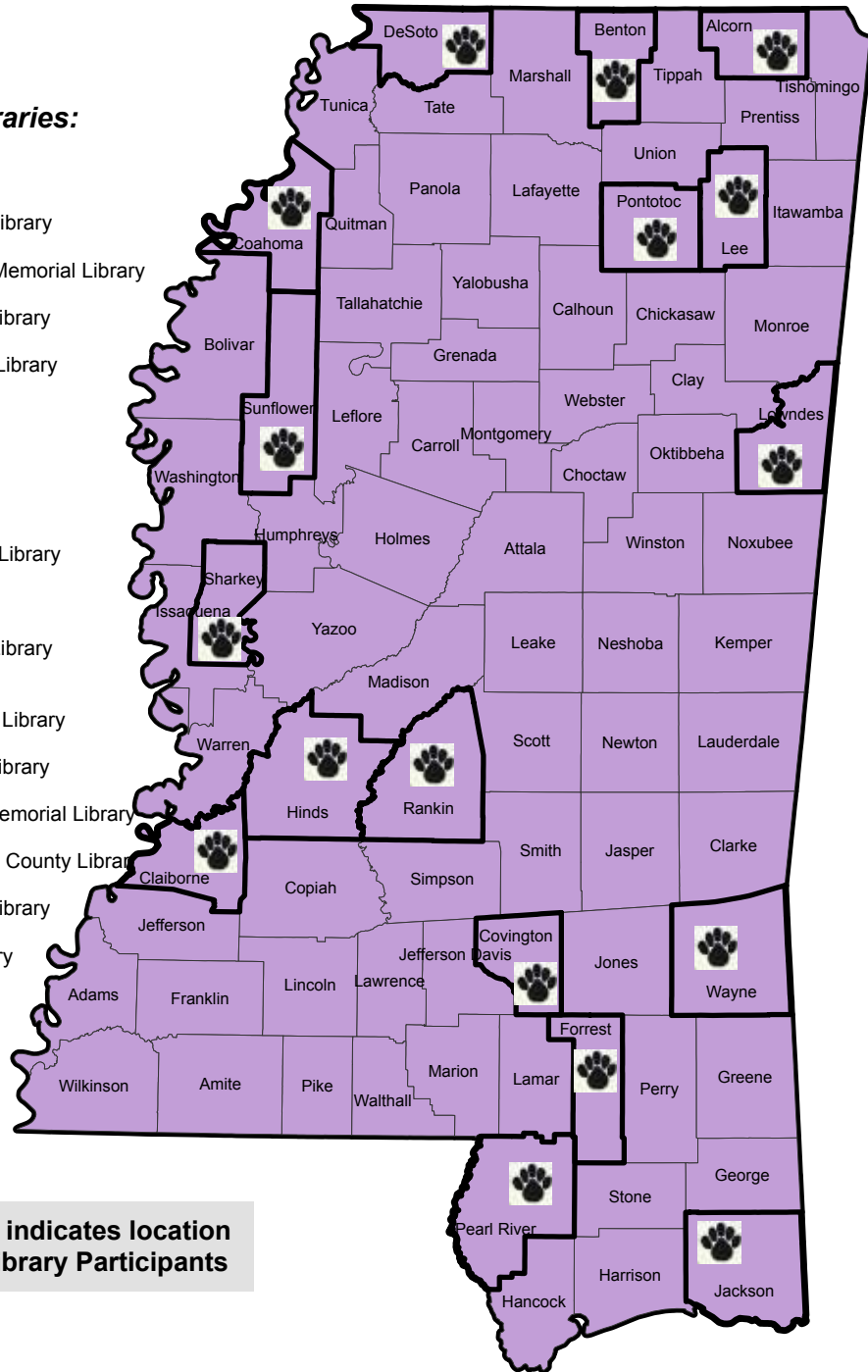


Figure 14

Source: Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB), 2010

Between the Lions Preschool Literacy - Jackson Metro Project

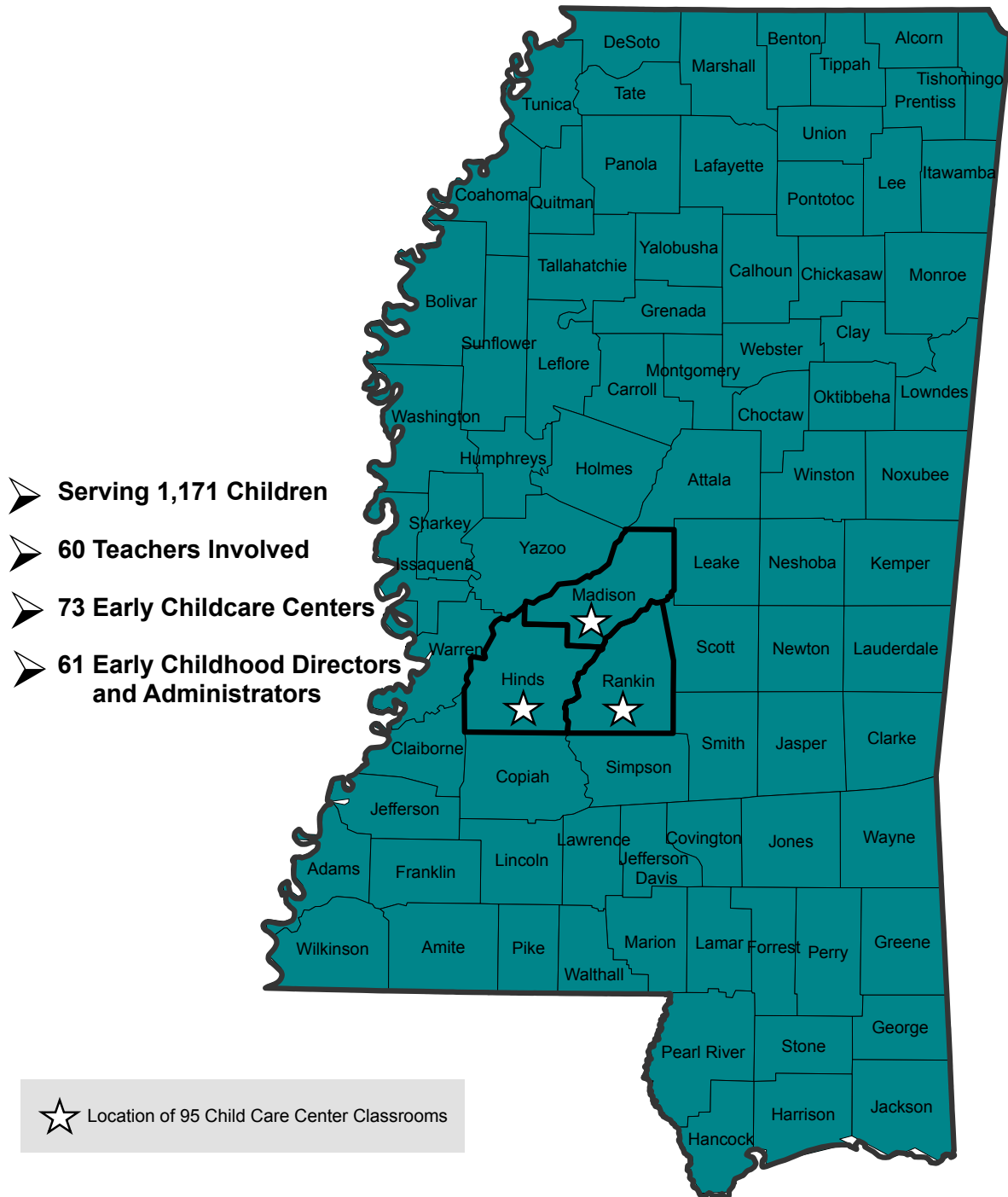


Figure 15

Source: Between the Lions[®] Preschool Literacy Initiative, 2010

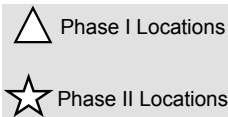
Between the Lions/Rotary Clubs Preschool Literacy Initiative

**Phase I
Participating Rotary Clubs**

- Forest Rotary Club
- North Jackson Rotary Club
- Meridian Rotary Club
- Leland Rotary Club
- Greenwood Rotary Club
- Starkville Rotary Club
- Rankin Co. Rotary Club
- Vicksburg Rotary Club
- Waynesboro Rotary Club

**Phase II
Participating Rotary Clubs**

- Canton Rotary Club
- Eupora Rotary Club
- Greenville Rotary Club
- Hattiesburg Rotary Club
- Jackson Rotary Club
- Lexington Rotary Club
- Louisville Rotary Club
- Madison-Ridgeland Rotary Club
- Natchez Rotary Club
- South Rankin Rotary Club
- Starkville Rotary Club
- Winona Rotary Club
- Yazoo City Rotary Club



- **26 Childcare Centers Adopted by Rotary Clubs**
- **26 Teachers**
- **Serving 349 Children**

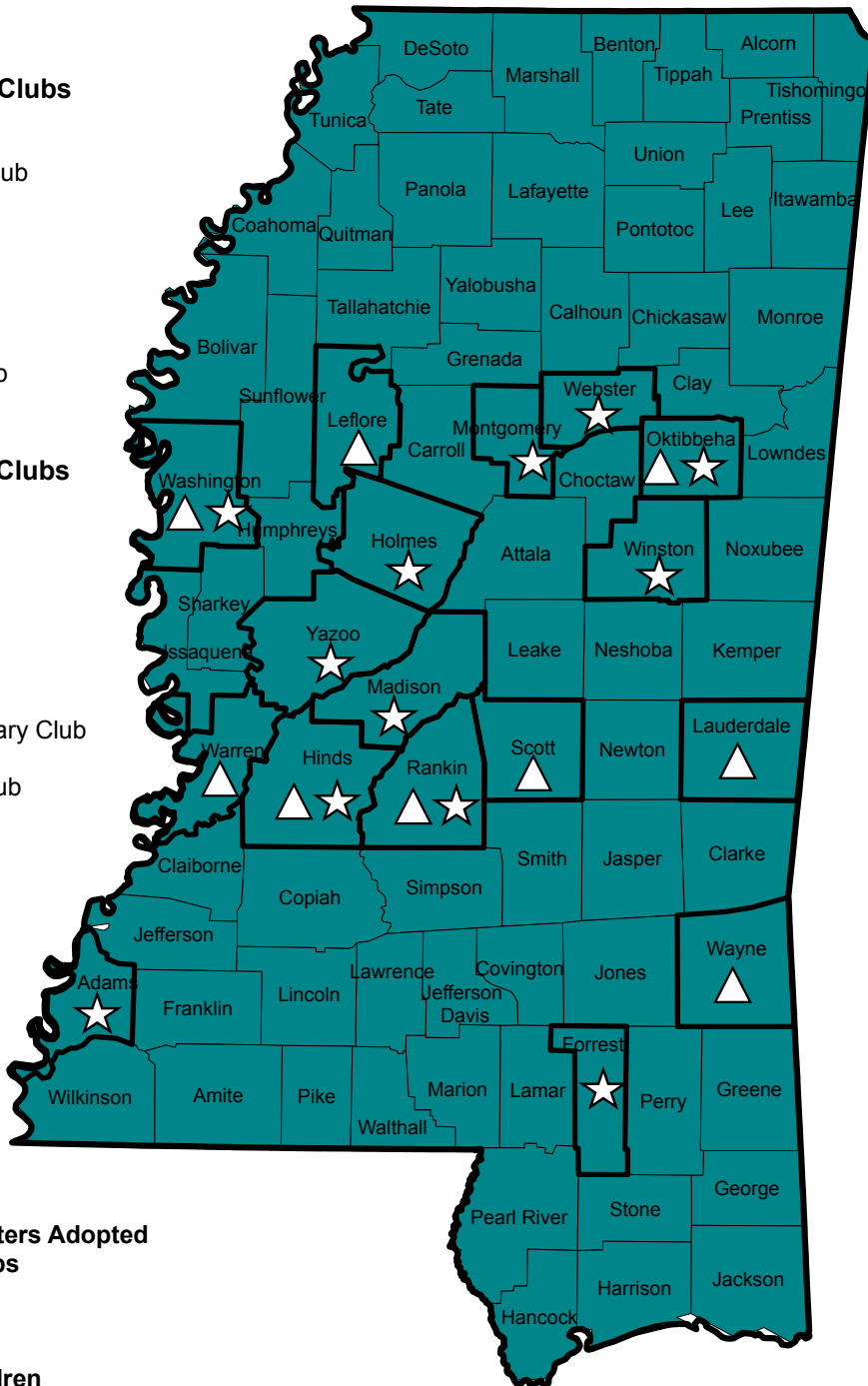


Figure 16

Source: Between the Lions® Preschool Literacy Initiative, 2010