positioned educationally than many of our males to take advantage of the economy’s shift. Our boys have long been able to fairly poorly in their academic achievement and still find substantial employment in the industrial sector where wages were high, even if the work was less interesting and intellectually engaging. Over the decades, males have become habituated into the belief that, irrespective of their performance in school, there would be work for them somewhere and work that would generate a reasonable middle class lifestyle for them. But those opportunities are disappearing quickly in America as witnessed by the loss of manufacturing jobs in Michigan since 2001. Failure to gain a high school diploma is now seriously problematic. Gaining some level of higher education, be it an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, will become the new threshold or benchmark, if it has not already become so.

I might be argued that females have become the unintended beneficiaries of a societal practice that sets behavioral expectations for them in school, but has persisted in letting “boys be boys.” The net result, so goes the argument, is that females have, through our societal expectations, developed a behavioral skill set that is more conducive to the present school experience and its study and work habits. Thus, as we examine the success of our young women in our educational institutions from kindergarten through higher education, as a gender they continually outperform their male counterparts. There are greater numbers and percentages of them than males succeeding in all the areas that are important for our society to move forward. Studies have found that high school males on the whole put greater stock in being a good athlete than planning to attend college or getting good grades [2]. Notwithstanding the importance of extra-curriculum sports in the lives of our students, how wrong-headed is such thinking? As parents, and particularly as fathers, are we not perhaps doing our sons a disservice by favoring attitudes that foster sports’ participation and success at the expense of academic performance? Winning a state championship as a 17 year old is a memorable one-time experience. Having a solid education that affords significant occupational opportunity and financial reward lasts a life-time.

[1] for an interesting history of women’s suffrage in America, see that topic in ‘wikipedia.org’

KENT COUNTY LITERACY COACH’S NETWORK
by Susan Laninga, GVSU 1976

Imagine 90 teachers in one room, excitedly talking about one topic. They gesture with their hands, their faces are animated and the room buzzes with voices filled with passion and conviction. This is a picture of the Literacy Coaches Network (LCN) of the Kent Intermediate School District. These teachers are representatives from grades Kindergarten through High School of public, charter, and Christian schools in Kent County. Their responsibilities range from full-time literacy coaches to full-time teachers who have been asked to spearhead the focus on literacy in their buildings. Some have special education degrees, others majored in reading instruction. Still others are experienced in specific content areas have years of classroom teaching experience. Many are elementary teachers, but one third have a background in secondary education. All are teacher leaders in this literacy effort.

Literacy is one of the five initiatives adopted, supported and encouraged by the Kent Intermediate Superintendents’ Association (KISA). “KISA chose literacy as an initiative because of its impact across all content areas. Strong literacy skills lead to success in the classroom and increased student achievement!” said Kevin Konarska, Kent ISD Superintendent (GVSU, 1987). “We wanted to raise the level of importance of literacy as well as help unify our school districts around this important work. Working collaboratively gives it great strength. Kent ISD’s role is to bring staff together to engage in conversation around ‘best practices’ and create an ongoing dialogue that will sustain this work through all districts.”

The Kent Curriculum Council was charged to carry out this initiative. Char Firlik (GVSU, 1987) was hired to develop an action plan for literacy. She worked with county leaders to define literacy in an “Action Model for Literacy Achievement.”

The framework of this model elaborates 6 facets of literacy-building:

1. Use of common standards, including curriculum, standards, vocabulary and instructional strategies.
2. Comprehensive instructional models, such as the gradual release or scaffold model.
3. Literacy instruction for content.
4. Use of common assessments and data, including classroom, grade level, building, and district data as well as state testing data.
5. Research-based intervention strategies, such as differentiation and learning styles, response to intervention models and targeted instruction.
6. Collaborative professional development using professional experts, book studies, and coaching models.

The LCN is a targeted group of teacher leaders. The network gives them a place to come together to learn about what is happening across the nation, state, and in all of our districts regarding literacy strategies and coaching techniques, sharing their successes and their needs. After attending the coaches meeting once a month, the teachers go back to their buildings energized to work further with their staffs. Nationally and globally-recognized presenters, such as Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Miriam Trehearan have come to the county to spread their knowledge and successful experiences with literacy-building. Professional development opportunities in Learning Styles (Dunn and Dunn Model), Differentiation, and Tactile/Kinesthetic strategies (Foldables) have been offered to all educators.

The LCN Leadership team, comprised of Char Firlik, Mary Stearns, Patrunella Koster (GVSU, 1985), Susan Laninga (GVSU, 1976), Maureen Grey, Kailone Dunsmore, and Julia Reynolds, thoughtfully plan activities for each network meeting. Their goal is to give participants plenty of food for thought about literacy, as well as time to converse, debate and reflect. The leadership models the strategies they are teaching and give time for guided practice. The LCN has studied such books as The Literacy Coach’s Survival Guide, by Cathy Toll, Literacy Leadership: Six Strategies for Peoplework, by Donald A, McAndrew, and others. Teachers discuss articles, such as “Try Feed Forward instead of Feedback,” by Marshall Goldsmith and “A Framework for Shared Leadership,” by Linda Lambert.

LCN members learn about change models to help them facilitate change and improvement in their buildings. They practice strategies for effective meeting design and productive professional conversations using realistic scenarios. Those with ideas that are working well share them with the group in roundtable format, effectively spreading best practices throughout the county.

Planning for next year, 2007-2008, is already underway. The group of educators who participated this year have expressed interest in continuing to learn and grow together. The look of the second year may not be the same. It may be centered around the coaches’ own expressed needs and interests. Local districts have seen the value of their literacy coaches learning from those in other districts, more teachers want to participate in this training, and the probability of a second year of building teacher leaders in literacy is emerging. And most importantly, Kent County is building a true network of vibrant educators who will continue to support one another in the pursuit of literacy for all students.