


Improving the Literacy Skills of Low Income Bilingual Preschoolers

by

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Abstract

The gap between the literacy scores of preschool children in poverty and their middle and upper class peers upon entry into kindergarten continues to grow. This proposal seeks \$712.00 to increase the emergent literacy skills of a group of low-income preschool children through providing a combination of quality children's literature in their native language for home and school use, and training for their parents on strategies to support their children's emergent literacy skills.

Research by Lee and Burkam (2002) found that the cognitive scores of preschool aged children in poverty are more than 60% lower than their peers in higher socioeconomic groups (p. 19). Improving the emergent literacy skills of low-income preschoolers is central to closing this gap. Preschool Dual Language Learners (DLLs) in poverty are at an even bigger disadvantage with very few pieces of quality children's literature in their native language available at school and in their homes. This proposal

focuses on the multilingual Bayside Head Start program, which serves 18 low-income preschoolers and their families. This group includes native English, Spanish and Hmong speaking children and families.

The following objectives are proposed to meet this need:

1. Increase the number of books in each child's native language in the classroom.
2. Increase the children and family's access to books in the child's native language in the home.
3. Increase the parent's ability to support and nurture their child's developing emergent literacy skills.
4. Increase the children's emergent literacy skills.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Convincing evidence exists that the future success of children in our schools is dependent upon their early literacy skills. The achievement gap between children in poverty and children in the middle and upper socio-economic classes is significant and growing. Improving the emergent literacy skills of low-income children is central to closing this gap. In addition, children from poverty who are also Dual Language Learners (DLLs) are at an even bigger disadvantage. A 2003 research review by Slavin and Cheung found that early literacy programs that used the child's home language were the most successful (pp. 2-3). The achievement gap continues for children in poverty into the upper grades and contributes to higher dropout rates in high school. In addition to the consequences to individual children and their families, the impact on our economy has a wide-reaching effect as well. High school dropouts have significantly reduced earning power over their lifetime, which continues the cycle of poverty into the next generation.

Statement of the Problem

The children at Bayside Head Start (BHS) need to improve their emergent literacy skills. According to preliminary results from the Kindergarten screener for the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), the children in the City of Madison Head Start programs scored 79.5% “not ready” for kindergarten as opposed to 26.5% “not ready” district-wide on the kindergarten screener. “Not ready” for kindergarten is defined as having three or more areas out of 13 with a deficiency. (D. Jost, personal communication, July 9, 2012) This is a huge difference in readiness skills between children in Head Start programs and children district-wide.

In particular, BHS is a program based in the community center of a low-income apartment complex in Madison, Wisconsin. This program serves 18 children in a mixed-aged grouping with ages ranging from three to four years. To be eligible for Head Start, a family of four has to have an income below the National Poverty Guidelines (\$23,050). All 18 children in the BHH program are from families whose income is below this guideline. In addition, 13 of the 18 children are Dual Language Learners (DLLs) – five are native Hmong speakers and eight are native Spanish speakers. These DLLs are at a double risk of entering kindergarten with literacy skills significantly below their middle and upper class peers.

Currently, BHS has many pieces of quality children's literature in English available to the children and families but very few books in Spanish and no books in Hmong. In addition to a strong family presence, this program uses classroom volunteers who read to the children daily in the child's home language. Currently, volunteers and family members have to translate the books while they are reading, from English into either Hmong or Spanish to share with the children in their home language. Often the English skills of the family members and volunteers are not strong enough to provide for this on-the-spot translation.

One of the disadvantages facing children in poverty, according to Lee and Burkam (2002) is that many families in poverty do not have books in their homes. "High-SES children own about three times as many books as low-SES children" (p. 39). Providing quality children's books in the home is one of the best ways to increase a preschool child's emergent literacy skills. Having those books written in the home language of the family is an added advantage.

In addition, many families in poverty are unsure of their role in supporting their children's emergent literacy skills. They lack the confidence and skills to support and reinforce their children's emerging skills. The strong parent education component of the Head Start program requires monthly family meetings that provide an existing structure for parent training on supporting children's emergent literacy skills.

This project attempts to address these literacy needs by providing quality children's literature in English, Hmong and Spanish in the classroom; by providing soft-covered copies of each book in the child's home language for the child to take home and share with his/her family and by providing monthly trainings for parents on supporting their child's emergent literacy skills through the use of these specific books. This proposal is consistent with the Dollar General Literacy Foundation's commitment to youth literacy as an investment which opens doors for children and, "...the one gift that no one can take away—the one gift that lasts a lifetime" (2012).

Purpose of the Grant Proposal

The purpose of this grant proposal is to gain funds to improve emergent literacy skills through a combination of access to resources in the home and in the classroom and training for parents and guardians in supporting and reinforcing the emergent literacy skills of their preschool children. The funds will be used to purchase copies of quality children's literature in English, Spanish and Hmong for use in the classroom and a copy for each family in their native language to take to their homes. These materials will benefit the children, families and the community.

Definition of Terms

Children in Poverty. The United States Census Bureau (2012) “. . . uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. . . official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps).” The federal poverty level for 2012 is \$23,050 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, p. 1).

Dual Language Learners (DDLs). Dual Language Learners are children who “. . . acquire two or more languages simultaneously, and learn a second language while continuing to develop their first language. The term ‘dual language learners’ encompasses other terms frequently used, such as Limited English Proficient (LEP), bilingual, English language learners (ELL), English learners, and children who speak a Language Other Than English (LOTE)” (Office of Head Start, 2008, para. 4).

Emergent Literacy. “Emergent literacy is defined as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are considered to be the developmental precursors to reading and writing and more broadly to school achievement” (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1989, p. 849).

Family Fun Night (FFN). This is a monthly, evening meeting for children and families held in Madison Head Start programs during the school year. FFNs include a parent-child activity, a meal and a training component for the parents with childcare provided for the children.

Family Literacy. *The Improving School Readiness for Head Start Act (2007)* defines family literacy as:

- “Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.
- Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children.
- Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences” (Family Literacy Services, para. 2).

Head Start (HS). “Head Start is a federal program that promotes the school readiness of children ages birth to 5 from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social and emotional development” (Office of Head Start, 2009).

Quality Children’s Literature. Quality children’s literature should be of the highest literary and artistic value (Glazer, 2000, p. 33). One way to distinguish literary and artistic value is to look at award winning books. Three of the most well-known awards for children’s literature are the Newbery, the Caldecott and the Coretta Scott King that are presented annually by the American Library Association.

Methodology

Chapter two will include a literature review with an emphasis on the lack of emergent literacy skills of preschoolers in poverty with English as a second language and the importance of family literacy. Project goals and objectives will be discussed in chapter three. Chapter four will include our implementation strategies for the purchase of the books and parent/guardian trainings, timeline, budget and dissemination plan. A cover letter will be included in the appendix.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will review what is known about emergent literacy skills of preschool aged children in poverty. It will focus on the special challenges faced by preschoolers in poverty who are also Dual Language Learners (DLLs). The importance of a child's home language and family involvement in the development of emergent literacy skills will also be summarized.

The Importance of Emergent Literacy Skills for Preschoolers in Poverty

All children entering school in the United States should have the expectation of success. This is not true for many of our children - especially children in poverty. The achievement gap between children in poverty and children in the upper and middle socio-economic classes can be seen as early as nine months of age. Children in poverty are:

- 25% more likely to drop out of school
- 40% more likely to become a teen parent
- 50% more likely to be placed in special education
- 60% more likely to never attend college
- 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime (Ounce of Prevention, Why Investments in Early Childhood Work, 2012).

The difference in early literacy skills between children in poverty and children in the middle class is significant. A 1993 study by Brizius and Foster found that upon entry into first grade, almost 50% of low-income children are approximately two years behind their peers in literacy development (p. 4). Nord, Lennon, Liu, and Chandler (2000) identified risk factors that included low-income status and non-English speaking to influence emergent literacy skills in preschoolers, "Fifteen percent of children with two

or more risk factors recognize all the letters of the alphabet compared to 29% of children with no risk factors. Similarly, 26% of children with two or more risk factors show at least three signs of emerging literacy compared to 47% of children with no risk factors” (Signs of Emerging Literacy by Child, Parent, and Family, para. 3).

Learning to read is integral to being successful in school. Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio & Manlove (2002) found that literacy experiences in the preschool years are integral to developing the basis for later success in reading, “. . . some of the pre-literacy skills that children develop over the first 5 or 6 years of life are related to later reading and school achievement in the elementary school years” (as cited in Neuman & Dickson, 2002, p. 194). Most of what we know from research on emergent literacy skills has been conducted with English speaking preschoolers. A study done by Snow & Tabors (1993) on monolingual English speakers found that “. . .the early childhood period constitutes a critical opportunity for young children to develop language and emergent literacy skills that constitute the foundation for more sophisticated literacy skills” (p. 13). A 2001 study by Snow, Roach, Tabors, & found:

In longitudinal analyses with a low-income, English-speaking population, the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development, for example, has shown that language input and support for literacy in the prekindergarten time period, at home and in preschool, is predictive of early literacy abilities in kindergarten, which in turn are highly predictive of skill in fourth-grade reading comprehension (as cited in Neuman & Dickinson, 2002, p.159).

School success has life-long effects. Rynell (2008) reports “. . . individuals without a high school degree on average experience unemployment rates that are 3 to 5

times greater than the rates experienced by individuals with a college degree or more” (p. 10).

Most families in poverty cannot afford children’s books for their home. However, books are an important part of a home literacy environment. A study by Lindsay (2010) examined the consistent gap between the academic performance of children in poverty and their upper and middle-class peers and postulates, “One possible remedy to the socioeconomic gaps in academic achievement is to make sure that children of low-income families have access to high-quality, age-appropriate books. Having books can facilitate children’s reading and shared reading between children and their caregivers” (Children’s Access to Print Material and Outcomes, p. 3). All of the children in this program live in families whose income levels fall below the federal poverty guidelines.

Unique Challenges Faced By Dual Language Learners (DLLs)

There is limited research on the emergent literacy skills of DLLs. However, while preschoolers in poverty face significant challenges, non-English speaking preschoolers in poverty face even more. Research suggests that non-English speaking students do not perform as well as their English-speaking peers. According to Nord et al. (2000):

There are some differences in the percentage of 3- to 5-year-old children who show signs of emerging literacy by the children's race and ethnicity. Hispanic children are significantly less likely than non-Hispanic children to recognize all the letters of the alphabet. Fourteen percent of Hispanic children can do so compared with 25% of white, non-Hispanic; 25% of black, non-Hispanic; and 30% of children of some other race or ethnicity (p. 2).

A report from the National Center for Education Statistics (1995) found “. . . minority-language status (is) most consistently associated with fewer signs of emerging literacy and a greater number of difficulties in preschoolers” (Approaching Kindergarten: A Look at Preschoolers in the United States, p. 2).

There is a strong connection between oral language skills and literacy - in both English and a child’s home language. Current research has validated the idea that a child’s strength in his home language is connected to the child’s strength in learning to speak and to read in English. According to a study by Paez & Rinaldi (2006) “Moreover, language and literacy development in the home language supports the development of language and literacy in English” (Regression Analyses, para. 2). In addition, Slavin and Cheung (2003) found “There is a great deal of evidence that children’s reading proficiency in their native language is a strong predictor of their ultimate English reading performance” (p.2).

Including the home language of all of the children in a classroom environment is essential to providing a respectful, inclusive atmosphere in preschool programs. A study by Houston (1995) found that speaking the family’s language is not the most crucial element:

It is (the teacher’s) *attitude* towards language that counts. Because your opinion is so very important to the children’s development of values, it is essential that you respect and value their language by reflecting it in your classroom. One of the easiest and most effective ways to do this is through books (p. 3).

One way to include all of the home languages of the children and families in the classroom is to encourage parents to visit the classroom and speak and read to their child

in their native tongue. Currently, there are few books in Spanish and Hmong in this classroom from which families can choose. Reading books in English can sometimes be a challenge for parents who are non-fluent in reading and speaking in English.

“Encouraging parents to read to their children in their richest language builds English language reading because abilities developed in the first language transfer to English. Reading in the child’s first language also keeps parents with limited English proficiency involved in their children’s literacy development” (Columbo, 2005, p. 6).

The Importance of Family Involvement in Emergent Literacy

The Head Start model recognizes that parents are their children’s first and most important teachers. According to a Head Start report on Dual Language Learners (2008), “Preschoolers’ development and learning are enhanced when they are able to communicate at home what they have learned at school” (Cost of Losing the First Language, para.2). Studies have substantiated the importance of this home-school connection that correlates with school readiness. A study by Nord, et al. (2000) found “. . . strong evidence that children whose families are engaged in literacy activities with them are more likely than other children to show each of the signs of emerging literacy and to show three or more such signs” (p. 10).

Literacy activities in the home are vital, but the frequency of these activities varies among cultures. Nord, et al. (2000) found:

There are also differences in families' engagement in literacy activities with their children by the children's race and ethnicity. Hispanic children and black, non-Hispanic children were less likely than white, non-Hispanic children to have been read to by (61% and 71% vs. 89%), told stories by (40% and 45% vs. 53%), or

done arts and crafts with (32% and 28% vs. 44%) their families three or more times in the last week (Association Between Family Literacy Activities and Children's Emerging Literacy, para. 6-7).

Having a literacy rich environment in the home is essential to supporting a child's literacy development. According to Lin (2003) who studied five components of parent involvement, quality home literacy environments “. . . predicted almost all kindergartners' early literacy skills” (Research Findings, para. 1). Research tells us there are fewer literacy related materials in the homes of children and families in poverty. Bowman and Burns (2001) report a 1998 study conducted by the National Research Council which found that 52% of low-income families had fewer than 26 books in the home as compared to 23% of middle and upper-income families. In addition, in 65% of non-English speaking homes had fewer than 26 books in their homes as compared to 20% of English-speaking homes (Eager To Learn, p. 70). As reported by Lindsay (2010), numerous studies “. . . have demonstrated that children from poorer families have fewer books in their homes, have fewer books available in the school and classroom library, and live farther from public libraries than do children raised by middle- and upper-income families”(p. 3). The purpose of this grant is to improve the emergent literacy skills of the children at Bayside Head Start through a combination of parent training and books for the home.

Chapter III: Project Goals and Objectives

The ability to read is integral to success in school and success in life. Children in poverty face significant challenges to becoming readers and children who are also Dual Language Learners (DLLs) face even more obstacles. This grant is important because it will not only increase the children's emergent literacy skills and access to books in the home, it will involve parents in their child's literacy journey. Empowering parents to become involved in this process will reap benefits far beyond the preschool years. This chapter will describe the goal of this grant proposal and will outline the four objectives necessary to meet this goal.

Overall Project Goal: Improve the Emergent Literacy Skills of the Preschool Children at Bayside Head Start Program.

Objective 1: Increase the number of books in the child's native language in the classroom. The lead teacher in this classroom will identify three pieces of quality children's literature which will be purchased in the three languages spoken in this classroom: English, Spanish and Hmong. These hard cover copies will be placed in the classroom library to be used by volunteers who join the classroom every morning for a 30 minute block of reading time in the child's home language.

Objective 2: Increase the children and family's access to books in the child's native language in the home. The same books will be purchased in paperback form in the child's home language to be used during parent trainings and then taken to the home.

Objective 3: Increase the parent's ability to support and nurture their child's developing emergent literacy skills. Three trainings in September, October and November will focus on supporting emergent literacy skills through the use of one of

these targeted books. Each month the parents will take the book home to share with their preschooler and utilize the strategies identified in the trainings. Parents will have time each month to discuss the successes and challenges associated with supporting their child's emergent literacy skills over the past month.

Objective 4: Increase the children's emergent literacy skills. Children will take a formal emergent literacy assessment administered by the teaching staff in September 2012 and January 2013 to assess their growth in emergent literacy skills.

Chapter IV: Project Methodology

Children in poverty typically enter kindergarten behind their peers in emergent literacy skills. Increasing these skills will positively impact the children's success in kindergarten and in general, their success in school. Access to quality literature in the home and parent involvement has been shown to improve literacy readiness in young children. This chapter will include an action plan, proposal timeline, evaluation and dissemination plans, and a budget.

The methodology chosen for this project is consistent with practices already in place in this Head Start Classroom. This project will take place over ten months and will connect activities in the classroom with monthly parent trainings. The methodology includes:

- *Small group time* is a daily 20-minute session, divided according to the child's native language and led in that language.
- *Morning reading time* is scheduled daily at drop off time. During this 30-minute block of time, community volunteers read books to the children in the child's native language. Frequently, the volunteers have to translate books from English into Spanish and Hmong as they are reading because the only books available in the classroom are written in English.
- *Family Fun Nights (FFNs)* are parent/child/teacher meetings, which include dinner, a parent/child activity and a parent training. These monthly events are integral to this program and will be used to facilitate the desired outcomes.

Action Plan and Project Timeline

Action Plan

One of the cornerstones of Head Start programming is collaboration and teamwork. In order to achieve the goals and objectives of this project, each member of the Bayside Head Start teaching team will need to be involved and dedicated to the goals and objectives. Books will need to be chosen and purchased, the small group curriculum will need to be coordinated with the parent trainings, and time will need to be set aside for assessment.

The project participants are as follows:

Executive Director - Dane County Head Start	Dr. Carol Harms
Lead Teacher - Bayside Head Start	Karen Smith
Social Worker - Bayside Head Start	Sue Vang
Assistant Teacher - Bayside Head Start	Marcia Garcia
Parent Involvement Coordinator - Bayside Head Start	Nicole Brown
Project Coordinator	Linda Benzschawel

Project Timeline

Month	Activities
August 2012	Schedule monthly FFNs
	Plan the FFN parent trainings on the topic of supporting early literacy skills
	Provide information for parents on the overall proposal including goals and benefits to children and families

Research the Association for Library Service to Children's *Notable Children's Book List* for recommended titles

Identify and purchase a copy of three book titles in English, Spanish and Hmong in hard cover for the classroom and in paperback in the family's native language

September 2012

Place hardcover copies of each book in English, Spanish and Hmong in the classroom library to be used during morning reading time

Read to the children in their home language at morning reading time

Administer the Early Literacy Skills Assessment to the children

October 2012

Implement first FFN parent training and give Book #1 to the family in their home language

Implement small group reading time with children. The small groups will consist of reading Book #1 and a follow up discussion focusing on emergent literacy skills

Read to the children in their home language at morning reading time

November 2012

Implement second FFN parent training using Book #2.

Include a time for parents to report on any successes and/or challenges they encountered after using the strategies introduced at last month's training

	<p>Give Book #2 to the family in their home language</p> <p>Implement small group time with children. The small groups will consist of reading Book #2 and a follow up discussion.</p> <p>Read to the children in their home language at morning reading time</p>
December 2012	<p>Implement third parent training, including a time for parents to report on their successes and challenges around using the books with their children. Give Book #3 (in their home language) to the family</p> <p>Implement small group reading time, which will consist of reading Book #3 and a follow up discussion</p> <p>Read to the children in their home language at morning reading time</p>
January 2013	<p>Administer the ELSA to the children</p> <p>Administer an evaluation survey for the parents to completion the effectiveness of the trainings during the January FFN</p>
March 2013	<p>Present information about this project at the Launching Into Literacy and Math Spring 2013 Conference</p>
April 2013	<p>Share results from the pre and posttest and the parent survey with parents and families at the April Family Fun</p>

Summer 2013 Present information about this project at the State Early Childhood Conference, the local Head Start Association Meeting and the State Head Start Association Annual Meeting.

Evaluation Plan and Tools

The summative evaluation plan for this grant proposal is as follows:

1. The Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA) will be administered in September 2012 and again in January 2013. The ELSA measures four components of early literacy: comprehension, phonological awareness, alphabetic principles and concepts about print. It is an authentic, research-validated assessment tool designed to be used with 3 to 5 year old children in pre-K classrooms. This tool is available in English and Spanish and will be adapted by the staff for the Hmong speaking children.
2. The parent participants will complete a locally-developed pretest in September 2012 and a post-test in January 2013. This self-assessment will measure the frequency of parent/child book reading and the use of supportive early literacy strategies as identified during the three trainings.

The formative assessment will include monthly evaluations of each of the trainings by the parent participants. In addition, a checklist to record ongoing reading with individual children and their engagement in the books will be completed by the classroom reading volunteers and reviewed weekly by the teaching staff over the course of the grant activities.

Dissemination Plan

The purpose of dissemination is to increase awareness among parents, Head Start staff and the community of the importance of family involvement and the child's native language in early literacy skill attainment. Dissemination of project results is a project priority. Among the multiple dissemination strategies used in this project, results will be shared with parents and families during the April Family Fun Night. In addition, both the Lead Head Start Teacher and the Project Manager will present at the Head Start local and state level. To ensure quality and uniformity of presentations, the key project participants will create a PowerPoint presentation approximately 30 minutes in length that can be easily adapted for different audiences. A minimum of three presentations is planned at the State Early Childhood Conference, the local Head Start Association Meeting and the State Head Start Association Annual Meeting. The content of the PowerPoint will describe the project, specifically the purpose, description of the participants, procedure and assessment results including any anecdotal reports from the parents, children and teachers involved in this project.

This project will also be presented in a workshop highlighting the importance of using a child's native language and family involvement in emergent literacy skill attainment at the Launching into Literacy and Math 2013 Spring Conference. The Launching into Literacy and Math Conference is a collaborative project that has been supporting best practices in early literacy and math in the early childhood care and education community in the Madison, Wisconsin area for the past seven years. Through Saturday workshops, this Conference provides professional development opportunities for more than 450 early childhood caregivers, educators and families of young children

living in the city of Madison and/or Dane County in Wisconsin. Participants include English-speaking, Spanish-speaking and Hmong-speaking family childcare providers, early childhood education staff, kindergarten teachers and administrators. Many of the sessions are videotaped and broadcast on the Madison Public School District's cable television channel to reach an even larger audience.

Budget Narrative

This proposal requests a sponsor investment of \$712.00, 40% of the total project costs. The remaining 60% (in-kind salaries) will be shared by the applicant as evidence of its commitment to the project. With the exception of the funds requested to purchase the books for the proposal, the requested funds will be used to supplement already existing programmatic activities. The following comments clarify the basis for calculations of budget items. Office supplies are based on best reasonable estimates and include laser cartridges, printer paper, folders and general items such as paper clips, pens and staples, which will be used in the parent training portion of this proposal. The results of this project will directly impact the literacy skills of 18 low-income preschoolers who are at risk for education failure and their families who will play an important role in supporting their literacy development.

Table 1**Budget**

Budget Item	Cost/Item	Total Amount Requested
In-Kind Salaries:		
K.Smith, Lead Teacher @ 30 hours x \$20/hr	\$600	\$0
S.Vang, Social Worker @ 30 hours x \$18/hr	\$540	\$0
Books:		
9 Hardcover Books for Classroom	\$ 20	\$180
54 Paperback Books for Trainings and Home	\$ 8	\$432
Office Supplies – Basic	\$100	\$100
Total		\$712

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Appendix A

Mr. Jackson Routh, Director
Community Initiatives Program
Dollar General
100 Mission Ridge
Goodlettsville, TN 37072

RE: Letter of Intent
Books for English Language
Learners
Madison Area Technical College

Dear Mr. Routh:

This letter conveys my intent to submit a formal proposal in response to your recent initiative on youth literacy. My 12 year history with preschool literacy in Head Start programs in Dane, Green and Milwaukee Counties has empowered me to be an advocate for improving the literacy skills of low income preschoolers in general and preschool English Language Learners in poverty in particular, and matches your programmatic goals. You will receive the required original and six proposal copies in advance of your January 1, 2012 deadline. In the meantime, feel free to contact me for further information.

Sincerely,

Linda Benzschawel
Faculty
Early Childhood Education Program
Madison Area Technical College