

# Bright Spots in the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

BY BETSY RUBINER

In 2012, the National Civic League joined the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a collaborative effort by foundations, nonprofit partners, business leaders, government agencies, states, and communities across the nation to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate, prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship. The Campaign focuses on an important predictor of school success and high school graduation—grade-level reading by the end of third grade.

Research shows that proficiency in reading by the end of third grade enables students to shift from learning to read to reading to learn and to master the more complex subject matter they encounter in the fourth grade curriculum. Most students who fail to reach this critical milestone falter in the later grades and often drop out before earning a high school diploma. Yet two-thirds of U.S. fourth graders are not proficient readers, according to national reading assessment data. This disturbing statistic is made even worse by the fact that more than four out of every five low-income students miss this critical milestone.

Although schools must be accountable for helping all children achieve, providing effective teaching for all children in every classroom every day, the Campaign is based on the belief that schools cannot succeed alone. Engaged communities mobilized to remove barriers, expand opportunities, and assist parents in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities to serve as full partners in the success of their children are needed to ensure student success.

On its website, the Campaign regularly highlights “Bright Spots.” These are schools, programs, and communities nationwide using innovative and promising strategies to help low-income children read at grade level. They use intensive instruction and parent engagement as well as efforts to combat

lack of school readiness, summer learning loss, and chronic absence, to ensure that kids are proficient readers when they leave the third grade.

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading highlights these efforts because they work—in large urban centers, mid-size cities, and isolated rural areas—for families of every racial and ethnic group and in schools and communities where most children qualify for free and reduced priced meals. Some Bright Spots are elementary schools where students are thriving in a reading-infused culture, while others are programs and community initiatives, in and outside of school, that engage teachers, staff, parents, and community members in supporting student learning.

## Phoenix, Arizona

Phoenix-area families have an unusual opportunity to find out if their young child is a struggling reader, thanks to free reading screenings offered at the library for kindergarten through third-grade students.

“We’re not diagnosing dyslexia or learning disabilities. But we are able to identify red flags and provide guidance to the parent,” says Linda Barr, education director of the Arizona Literacy & Learning Center (ALLC) in Phoenix, a nonprofit partnering on the screenings with the Phoenix Public Library. Both belong to the area’s grade-level reading coalition. “We hope to reduce the impact of reading disabilities through early identification and intervention. The earlier intervention can be provided, the better chance the student has for success.”

Offered one Saturday a month at the main library, the screening lets a family know if their child is reading at grade level (or below or above), pinpoints areas to work on, and even predicts the child’s reading ability in third and eighth grades. Parents receive resources about what to do next—at

home and at school—including referrals for more screening and evaluation.

“It tells parents exactly where the weaknesses are and how much intensity is needed” to address them, says Barr. Because parents often find it daunting to request additional help and testing, “we give them information about how to talk to the school and this nice report that backs up what they’re saying.”

With some families coming from as far as Tucson, the program plans to expand, offering 25 screening events during the next fiscal year at the main library and others in metropolitan Phoenix. Available to all on a first-come-first-serve basis, the program served about 129 children in the last fiscal year.

Originally in four libraries, the five-year-old program is funded by the Phoenix Public Library, local Target stores, and Seasons for Sharing, a local charitable campaign. ALLC has provided affordable screenings, diagnosis, and treatment for people with learning disorders since 1987. This includes screenings throughout the community of children aged three to five to identify early developmental delays.

Last year, the library-based program began using the Predictive Assessment of Reading, an evidence-based, normed test. The roughly 30-minute process includes a 10-minute session where a screener works one-on-one with a child, assessing four skills needed to learn to read and keep growing in reading skills. These include “phonemic awareness” (understanding individual sounds in a word) and “letter-word calling” (looking at a word and pronouncing it correctly).

A computer generates a results report, in English or Spanish, which is discussed with the parents, in English or Spanish. “Some parents have more questions or their children are really far behind,” says Suzanne Brimley, ALLC executive director. “So we tend to meet with them a little longer because they need guidance on how to request help from the school and what to say.”

Offering the screenings in the community at the library on a walk-in basis is a comfortable, easy option for low-income families who often are

already library regulars and otherwise may not set up a screening appointment elsewhere. “We get so many kids because of that,” says Barr.

“The librarians noticed the need first. They would have parents come in saying ‘The teacher says my child really needs help, what can I do?’” Other times, parents detected reading issues at home that the teacher, busy working in a full classroom, could not.

Each family leaves with resources about community services on everything from parenting to library story times, activities to do at home, and a free children’s book. Parents, in turn, often leave behind written comments such as:

Thank you for the feedback and ideas. We can use them to improve her reading.

I’m very new to finding out about dyslexia and the information provided better helps to make informed decisions about my child.

Thanks. It was nice to get some questions answered.

### **Fresno, California**

In the summer, many children lose easy access to free school meals and lose some of what they learned during the school year. Enter California’s library summer meal programs, which have proved a win-win by combating summer hunger and summer learning loss. Offering children free nutritious meals and literacy activities at public libraries during the summer, the meal programs will be offered in 2014 in more California libraries.

“It was really successful. We served around 1,800 meals—that’s feeding a lot of children,” says Kari Johnson of the Fresno County Public Library, which belongs to Fresno’s Grade-Level Reading coalition. And most joined the library’s summer reading program. “We saw it as a need,” says Johnson, noting that over 90 percent of Fresno County children qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches. “We also wanted to provide key enrichment activities that prevent summer learning loss and encourage reading.”

Of the 2.5 million California children who participated daily in the national school lunch program, which closes in the summer, only about 17 percent participated in comparable summer meal programs in 2012, according to California Food Policy Advocates.

Inspired by an Oakland program started in 2011, Lunch at the Library—a coordinated outcomes-based project to keep kids healthy and engaged while school is out—was launched in four library systems in 2013 by the California Library Association and the California Summer Meal Coalition, with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Five additional library systems offered similar programs.

In six library systems in 2013—Fresno County, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego County, San Francisco, and Oakland—24,458 meals and 432 snacks were served. Activities included writing workshops, storytelling, and nutrition classes. Librarians reported more sign-ups for summer reading programs, more library cards issued, plus children with improved behavior and attentiveness.

The program brings new families to the library and engages them with the summer reading programs, which create communities of readers and library users,” says Natalie Cole, California Library Association associate executive director.

In 2014, summer meal programs will be available in at least 50 libraries in 18 California library systems, and Lunch at the Library will offer technical support and evaluation to all known programs.

In Fresno County—which served a cold lunch every weekday from mid-June to early August at the downtown library—Lunch at the Library will spread to three more libraries and enrichment activities will broaden to include the sciences.

Lunch at the Library’s particulars vary by community. The meal sponsor, for example, in Fresno County is the Economic Opportunities Commission, a community action agency. In Sacramento, it was a school district and in Los Angeles, a food bank.

In Fresno County, lunch was served by library staff, aided by two interns from the Boys & Girls Club

and one intern from Fresno State University, plus volunteers, many of them teens. Each child received up to five free books, thanks to grants from Fresno State and Dollar General Literacy Foundation.

“A lot of people can’t afford to buy a book,” says Johnson. “We were able to get a lot of books in children’s hands.”

Unaccustomed to meal service, library staff were schooled by Economic Opportunities Commission in the many health regulations and logistics involved. “One of the most important things is having staff engaged and informed,” advises Johnson.

Staff did find it uncomfortable to be prohibited from serving people over age 18. “It’s very awkward,” says Johnson. “If the children are hungry, the parents are probably hungry.” Adults were referred to other meal sites but Lunch at the Library is working to better address this.

“We anticipated a lot more issues and we didn’t have many,” says Johnson. “It really helped give children the physical foundation—healthy mind, healthy body—to keep them reading during the summer. It fueled their brain power.”

### **Tahoe Truckee, California**

For children living in isolated mobile home parks, summer can mean lots of free time with little to do. But a popular summer outreach program in California’s Tahoe Truckee area that sponsors teachers’ visits to the parks is providing welcome literacy activities and reading time.

“These kids really don’t leave those mobile home parks in the summertime. So having teachers come in, bring activities and lead them through different projects was a highlight of their summer,” says Laura Abbey Brown, executive director of Tahoe Truckee Excellence in Education Foundation, which leads the grade-level reading campaign, Tahoe Truckee Reads.

During its third summer, the Neighborhood Summer Reading Program served nearly 100 children in 2014, most in grades one through three, at three mobile home parks and three low-income housing

complexes. Most sites operated for five to six weeks, two mornings per week, in whatever space was available—from a community room to a parking lot.

“We decided to go to the communities that need this most and bring the program to them, which is unique,” says Brown. Because the program is not in a classroom and does not have a formal curriculum or enrollment, it is “looser, more grassroots, organic—and the kids love it,” says Brown, adding that most children showed up repeatedly.

Teachers were visiting kids of different ages and languages. They did the programming, engaging kids in a way they wouldn’t be otherwise. Where some parks are located, there’s not much nearby and the children just end up inside watching television.

At some sites, children were split into two age groups. Common activities included weekly reading groups, story time, literacy-skill building, nature walks, field trips, special guest visits, and hands-on projects. Teen volunteers sometimes assisted the local teachers.

Tahoe Truckee also has been beefing up more traditional summer programming since 2013, thanks to its school district and Superintendent/Chief Learning Officer Rob Leri, who joined Brown in attending a 2012 GLR Campaign gathering in Denver.

“It was incredibly powerful to see so many people collaborating and working together,” says Brown. “The superintendent embraced the Campaign and has led the charge on many initiatives, including summer programming, which we hadn’t had for several years.”

In 2013, the school district proposed, funded, and implemented a four-week school readiness “K Camp” to prepare children entering kindergarten in the fall and a four-week Summer Scholars program for specific rising first graders and second graders in need of focused academic attention.

In 2014, the number of children served grew to 269, from 211 the previous year. The half-day Summer Scholars was expanded to include rising third

graders, serving 129 children. Open to all kindergartners, K Camp served 140 children (41 percent of incoming kindergartners) and added more parent engagement components.

“We are proud to offer summer programs that reach students with the greatest need,” says Leri. “Summer Scholars provides targeted instruction and intervention, and offers students a continuum of learning over the summer months.”

Results of pre- and post-tests for students in both programs found growth in all tested areas. The average increases ranged from 12 to 58 percent for K Camp students in school readiness and early literacy-related skills and from 10 to 50 percent for Summer Scholars in literacy skills.

The goal is to grow Summer Scholars to include rising fourth and fifth graders. As more traditional programming expands, the long-term future is uncertain for the neighborhood program, which is funded with grants from community organizations. In summer 2014, one site closed early because many children were attending a school district program.

But the neighborhood program will likely be offered next summer, as attendance remains strong. “The Summer Scholars program is for the lowest performing 10 percent of students and we want to make sure there’s an offering for other kids,” says Brown.

#### **Hartford, Connecticut**

During the very cold and snowy winter of 2015, school attendance in Hartford, Connecticut, dipped, prompting new thinking by the local grade-level reading campaign.

“We started to look at how weather patterns affect our attendance, which is part of identifying barriers to attendance and developing intervention strategies,” says Mario Florez, a Hartford Public Schools administrator who oversees the local GLR campaign’s effort to reduce the number of students who are chronically absent—missing 10 percent or more of school.

Launched in 2013, Hartford’s chronic absence effort—addressing an issue that can slow students’

ability to read proficiently by the end of third grade—helped earn the local GLR community a 2014 Pacesetter honor from the Campaign.

Overall during the 2014–2015 school year through May, half of Hartford’s 30 public schools serving elementary students saw chronic absence drop by at least 5 percent from the previous year. “There’s good stuff going on. Now we have to scale it up,” says Florez.

Hartford’s effort began by assessing the lay of the land differently, with help from Attendance Works, a GLR Campaign Partner (which also has produced a winter-weather messaging toolkit). Rather than looking at average daily attendance—which can paint a falsely rosy picture and mask the repeatedly absent students—Hartford began focusing on chronic absence.

The discovery that chronic absence was as high as 47 percent in some elementary schools in 2012–2013 “was cause for concern,” recalls Paula Gilberto of United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Hartford’s GLR campaign lead. When these data were shared with city and school officials, they readily supported the chronic absence work, which was “profound, in terms of getting the attention that this needs,” says Gilberto. Having 15 GLR communities in Connecticut also helped win the governor’s buy-in.

Hartford’s effort is led by:

- The local GLR campaign’s chronic absence community team, which includes school officials, city employees, and community-based organizations. Bimonthly, it reviews districtwide attendance data for the 30 schools serving elementary students and works to update strategies.
- Hartford Public Schools’ District Attendance Remediation Team, DART, which includes two district-based attendance case managers and other central office staff. Biweekly, it reviews attendance data for all 49 district schools and addresses challenges that may spur changes in district policy.
- An attendance team at each school, which includes an administrator and support staff. Monthly, it analyzes school-level data, identifies students who are chronically absent or soon to

be and intervenes. At schools with 25 percent or more students who are chronically absent, the team must meet weekly.

Raising public awareness has been key. Signs about the importance of school attendance have adorned city buses and the Hartford airport’s baggage claim area. School newsletters spotlight the issue. Community activities mark Attendance Awareness Month in September. DART uses Facebook, Twitter, and other social media to draw attention.

With 19 percent of Hartford’s K-3 students chronically absent, as of May 31, 2015, other measures on the horizon to improve attendance policy and procedure include:

- Increasing central office oversight and assistance to schools to ensure that they pursue a tiered intervention that provides more intensive attention and services to students who are chronically absent or at risk.
- Sending “robo-calls” (automated phone calls from the school district to the homes of absent students) earlier, before 10 a.m., rather than the more customary 11:30 a.m.
- Going beyond the robo-call to collect information about students who are frequently absent and share it with staff via the district’s online student information system. An attendance team member will try to reach an absent student’s parent and use a new questionnaire to pinpoint and address issues causing chronic absence such as illness, housing, poverty, or transportation problems exacerbated by bad weather.

“It’s really about identifying those high-need families and giving them that personal touch,” says Florez. “This is happening at some schools but we hope to push it out districtwide.”

### Sarasota, Florida

Year after year at Alta Vista Elementary in Sarasota, Florida, only about half of the third graders were reading at grade level. But in 2014, this jumped to 73 percent.

“When any school improves students’ reading proficiency by more than 35 percent in one year, people

notice. When most of those students are from low-income homes, something special is happening,” says John Annis, senior vice president at the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, lead organization for the local grade-level reading campaign.

The improvement is the result of a community effort to boost reading achievement at Alta Vista and several other schools—including a recent GLR campaign-led push building upon the Foundation’s history of education work.

At Alta Vista, a 7-week summer program for 230 pre-kindergarten through second-grade students, addressing school readiness and summer learning loss, was offered, thanks to local donors Mary Kay and Joe Henson; an additional school social worker and masters-level teachers were hired; and the principal, Barbara Shirley, was named Florida’s 2014 Principal of the Year.

And there’s more to come from a local GLR campaign with bountiful resources, thanks to its many community partners and the strong relationship between the Community Foundation and the Patterson Foundation, a Sarasota-based private foundation that also supports the GLR agenda nationwide.

“What the Patterson Foundation has provided in leadership, guidance, and introductions to the right people, you can’t put a price tag on,” says Annis.

Sarasota’s GLR campaign began after a 2012 Campaign gathering in Denver that Annis attended, at the urging of the Patterson Foundation’s President and CEO Debra Jacobs.

“After connecting with the Campaign nationally, we knew there was a significant opportunity for Sarasota to tackle grade-level reading as a community,” says Jacobs. “Introducing the concept to the Community Foundation proved to be a win, building upon its literacy work and role as a convener.”

Returning inspired, Annis shared what he learned. “The Campaign seemed like the logical next step,” says Community Foundation President and CEO Roxie Jerde. “Our board created an education task

force that researched for a year before recommending that we join.”

Sarasota’s history of literacy work includes partnering with the school district, Sarasota County Libraries, the Early Learning Coalition, Children First, and others. In 2013, the Community Foundation concluded a five-year, \$3.2 million literacy initiative—funded through its Allen Wirtz Nobbe and Jo Bowen Nobbe Fund—targeted toward children from birth through eighth grade.

Since joining the GLR Campaign in 2013, Sarasota has narrowed its focus to birth through third grade and the Community Foundation board approved \$1 million to address school readiness and summer learning loss. More than 25 organizations are partnering with the foundation.

While it is a county-wide campaign, the Community Foundation began intensified work in neighborhoods served by four elementary schools, including Alta Vista. The schools have the highest rates of students in poverty and—as the task force’s data study revealed—the largest proportion of students who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade.

Strategies range from increasing the number of children attending quality pre-kindergarten programs to providing struggling students with certified reading coaches during the summer to employing a two-generation approach that addresses the economic and social services needs of vulnerable parents as well as their children.

Each month, leaders from the Community Foundation and the Patterson Foundation gather to discuss strategy, along with two former top education leaders from the region enlisted by the Patterson Foundation. While the Community Foundation continues its deep work in the targeted elementary schools, another consultant from the Patterson Foundation is inventorying existing resources to identify gaps throughout Sarasota County.

“By pulling all these smart people together to work on the same issue, we are much more likely to make progress,” says Annis. “And with our long history of education work, exceptional partners, generous



donors, great school leaders and a determined community, we're on the right track.”

### Fort Wayne, Indiana

Researchers have long known that low-income parents talk much less to their babies, which can slow literacy development. But why? More recent research suggests one answer: these parents do not know that talking to their babies is important.

Enter Let's Talk®, an oral language development initiative in Fort Wayne, Indiana, works to increase the quantity and quality of conversations between young children and their parents or caregivers in order to boost early learning and school readiness.

“Talking with your baby can help them grow an amazing mind,” says Dr. Jeanne Zehr, of the United Way of Allen County, a community leader for Fort Wayne's grade-level reading campaign.

A 1995 study by Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) linked children's early academic success to early verbal interaction with parents, documenting a huge gap in the number of words heard by low-income children vs. their wealthier peers that leads to developmental delays.

A 2008 study by Meredith Rowe found that differences by socioeconomic background in parents' child development knowledge should be considered when addressing this issue. Middle-class parents got parenting information from experts while working-class parents relied more on advice from friends.

Fort Wayne's effort to address the “30 million word gap” is among several, including in Georgia, Oakland, Seattle, Tulsa, Chicago, and Providence. It was inspired by Let's Talk developed by the Agenda for Children, a public-private collaboration in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Designed to empower parents, it starts by emphasizing “talk,” noting that:

- Children with rich vocabularies are better prepared to read and learn in elementary school.
- The quantity and quality of talk with young children develops their language, reading, and writing abilities.

- The amount of reading and talking parents do with their children tends to differ based on parents' language, cultural background, and economic status.

Launched in 2013, Fort Wayne's effort targets new mothers in a leading hospital's birthing centers. About 1,600 moms at Parkview Health have received a message and gift box with educational materials, a children's book and a “Talk to me at bath time” washcloth from trained nurses. Moms learn to talk with, not at, their young child; to have back-and-forth conversations; and to talk often during daily activities in the language they speak best.

About 110 of these moms signed up to receive another gift and book in three months, plus a weekly text message with short-and-sweet talking tips. (When your baby says mama or dada, say the grown-up word. Make it into a sentence like “Yes, mommy is here.”) Another effort, Story Friends, focuses on at-risk four-year-olds in child care centers. A volunteer reading program with a targeted audience and purpose—to boost the verbal skills and vocabulary of four-year-olds identified as low language or English language learners—has served about 120 children in seven child care centers.

During the school year, 40 volunteers work with three children weekly, one-on-one, for 20 minutes each. They read the same book for two weeks, encouraging the child to do the talking and to identify words from vocabulary cards. The child takes the book home and moves to another, eventually receiving 17 free books. The child's classroom receives copies of the books.

Approximately 20 Burmese refugee parents who do not speak English were instructed to tell the book's story in Burmese but learn eight English words to use when discussing the book with a child. “It's a win-win: they're learning English and the child is learning English,” says Zehr.

Coordinated and funded by the United Way of Allen County, Let's Talk funders include Parkview Community Health Improvement Program and PNC Bank. Other efforts, from neighborhood outreach to literacy home visits, will be added to reinforce

the Let's Talk message via a network of community partners. "All of this is to build language skills for children to enter kindergarten ready to learn," says Zehr.

### Camden, New Jersey

Building on the "it takes a village" approach, Camden, New Jersey's Grade-Level Reading Campaign, Born to Read, has launched a volunteer-based one-on-one reading program for preschoolers as part of its multi-faceted early literacy initiative.

Inspired by successful evidence-based volunteering and mentoring programs, Born to Read is recruiting and training volunteers from throughout the region to be one-on-one readers.

"The goal is to build a large volunteer-based literacy intervention to increase reading exposure, strengthen literacy foundations for our youngest learners, and develop a lifelong love of reading," says Merilee Rutolo, Chief Operating Officer at Center For Family Services, a nonprofit agency in Camden that is the lead organization for the local GLR campaign.

Promoting volunteerism and citizen service to help young children learn to read is part of the GLR Campaign's agenda. National Volunteer Week—set for April 6–12 and sponsored by Points of Light, a national civic engagement group—offers an opportunity for GLR communities to highlight the value of volunteer reading tutors.

In Camden, volunteers are asked to commit to one hour per week throughout the school year. While parent volunteers are strongly encouraged, engaging the community is also a focus. But finding time to volunteer regularly with young children in a school classroom can be challenging for busy professionals.

"One challenge was the time commitment we were asking for," says Kelly Fischer, Center For Family Services' program coordinator who oversees the one-on-one reading program.

Flexibility has been key. To encourage volunteers from its community partners—Subaru, Campbell's

Soup, and Cooper Medical School of Rowan University—the one-on-one program encourages, but no longer requires a one hour per week commitment. Instead volunteers can form teams and designate a backup to fill in if a volunteer can't attend.

It took the pressure off and made the program more enticing," says Fischer. "We have recruited more volunteers because we changed that policy."

Now in its second year, the program has 30 volunteers reading in 10 Head Start sites. The program is in several public schools in Camden City and beyond, thanks to a partnership with BookMates, a local literacy program whose 300 volunteers work primarily with at-risk elementary school students in southern New Jersey.

Born to Read volunteers are assigned to a specific classroom where they read one-on-one with three students, each for 20 minutes. Focused on school readiness, the program primarily serves three- to five-year olds.

Each volunteer receives two hours of advance training to better ensure that they are teaching early learning skills. "We want to make sure all the volunteers are trained and supported in the best practice techniques to help build early literacy," says Rutolo. "It's an intentional approach."

The ancillary benefits are positive relationships, mentoring, and modeling. What we're trying to build in these early stages is a lifelong love of reading. If we make this a positive experience that the kids can look forward to every week, it develops a positive mindset and approach to reading.

The one-on-one program dovetails with other Born to Read efforts, including a parent engagement piece where parents learn similar skills to encourage early literacy. "What the kids are experiencing in the classroom can then be reinforced at home," says Rutolo.

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*Bright Spots are written and produced by the Campaign to showcase the work in Grade-Level Reading communities to achieve progress on school readiness, school attendance, summer learning, and grade-level reading by 2016. To find out more about the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, visit <http://gradelevelreading.net/>*

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