

Roanoke Embraces Reading Readiness Through and Through

BY CARLA KIMBROUGH

In early fall, a tractor-trailer loaded with 40,000 books rolled into Roanoke, Virginia. About twenty-five volunteers, aided by three forklifts, had three hours to unload the books. Then, the books were sorted and distributed to 50 organizations. Finally, the books will be in the hands of about 4,000 low-income children living in this southwest Virginia city of about 100,000 residents.

The books came from First Book, a nonprofit social enterprise founded in 1992 that has provided more than 170 million new books, learning materials, and other essentials to children in need. In Roanoke, getting books to these children is the work of the Star City Reads program, a community-wide effort involving people from multiple sectors—schools, government, nonprofits, and more—who crisscross the city to help children gain strong reading skills.

“We all have a role to play in this,” Sheila Umberger, director of Roanoke Public Libraries, said of the community.

“This” is embracing the importance of reading, especially at grade level. Reading affects the entire community’s progress, Umberger said. Children who read at grade level end up graduating, and adults who can read well become employable. That understanding has spread over the last several years in Roanoke. “We look at it [grade-level reading] much more seriously,” Umberger said of how Roanoke has changed since the community joined the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and won an All-America City award in 2012.

Roanoke became one of 15 communities honored in June 2017 with the All-America City award for work to improve grade-level reading. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a collaborative of foundations, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and others, launched in 2010, has focused attention on the importance of reading proficiency at the third-grade level.

According to the Campaign, research shows that reading proficiency at the end of third grade prepares students to learn more complex information they encounter in fourth grade and that more than four out of five low-income students fail to meet that milestone. Another Campaign statistic: Poor children who are not proficient readers by the third grade also are four times more likely than proficient readers to leave school without a high school diploma.

Umberger has worked to ensure that the library wasn’t the only one thinking about reading. The number of Star City Reads partners has more than tripled since 2012 to 28 partners. She has invited people to get involved with the movement or welcomed just about any group that has called. That means the Roanoke City Public Schools, the Roanoke Police Department, Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority, and dozens of other non-profit organizations in the community are on board.

A telephone call from Umberger is how Dr. Rita Bishop, superintendent of Roanoke City Public Schools, got involved in Star City Reads. Bishop didn’t need much convincing. She already knew about the importance of reading. Bishop said she saw what happened to kids who couldn’t read. In fact, Bishop takes reading at grade level so seriously that she eliminated an assistant superintendent position and used the money to hire three reading specialists all focused on the elementary level.

Bishop pointed to two interventions that have had a “tremendous impact” on grade-level reading in Roanoke: getting students enrolled in quality pre-school programs and preventing the loss of academic skills during the summer. On top of that, the district evaluates the data, manages core beliefs, and adds some music.

Pre-school education is so important that the district will go door to door to get children enrolled.

Once children are enrolled, counselors need to discover any challenges regarding school attendance, she said. Students cannot learn if they are not in school. The district also works closely with Head Start educators to give them access to both professional development opportunities and educational materials used in elementary, so the children will be prepared for kindergarten.

“Ultimately, these are all our kids,” Bishop said of the pre-school age children.

The district also watches all kinds of data closely. The high school graduation rate: up from 55 percent in 2007 to 89.64 percent currently; virtually no difference existed in the 2016 graduation rate between black and white students. Achievement gaps between black and white students: shrinking, especially with language scores. Discipline issues: traceable to earlier years. Reading scores: from 60.5 percent pass rate for all third-graders in Title I schools in spring 2013 to a pass rate of 70.6 percent for all third-grade students in Title I schools in spring 2016.

“If you collect data, and you don’t make it actionable, all you have is a bunch of numbers,” Bishop said.

The district and its partners used data to decide to throw out remedial summer school and replace it with innovative summer enrichment programs, open to all, meals included. Between the school district and the library, more than 6,000 children were involved in summer learning programs in 2016. The summer slide that occurs in most districts across the United States has been erased with a six-week program, Bishop said.

Another strategy that Bishop cites is music education. Every elementary student has access to free musical instruments, thanks to a relationship with the VH1 Save the Music Foundation. Among its many benefits, music gives students the ability to concentrate, which is critical for reading, Bishop said. The district has four orchestras. Some of the students have performed at Carnegie Hall and other prestigious sites. Such experiences can change students’ lives, Bishop, the daughter of a concert pianist, said.

Paying attention to whether students read proficiently carries many benefits. One of those benefits can be seen within families. Children who read well and who have their own books can then read to younger siblings. Students who read at grade level exhibit calmness, direction, and more, Bishop said. Part of the students’ success academically, including reading, is connected to expectations, one of the district’s core beliefs.

“The most unlikely kids can be highly successful... It’s just expectations,” Bishop said. “What we have to do in urban education is to get the kids to believe they can.”

The Star City Reads program has “given us focus,” Bishop said. It has enabled tremendous collaboration with the library and created new community partnerships. To gain community support, Bishop talks to “everyone who will listen” and appeals to their self-interest about their own futures, which depend on having a trained workforce. Having smart kids benefits everyone, Bishop tells them. She also points to a strong relationship between the school district and the city government, which earmarks 40 percent of city income to schools.

“It’s so nice to have them know what we’re doing,” Bishop said of city government leaders. “They are important players in education, and they care about grade-level reading. I’m just proud the city gets it.”

Another entity that gets it is the Roanoke Police Department. When Scott Leamon started RPD Reads in 2014, the department would visit three Head Start locations once a month. Department officials would read books during special events such as Read Across America and would talk about traffic dangers and dog bites on other visits. But Leamon said he was looking for more opportunities, so he reached out to Star City Reads.

“I asked to partner with them since they had access to books, figuring I could give every book we read to each pre-school and after-school program that we visit,” said Leamon, crime prevention specialist/community outreach with the Roanoke Police Department.

When Leamon first started reading, he noticed the well-worn books at various locations. The Star City

Reads partnership enables the department to deliver four to five books during each visit, which Leamon said could mean 40 to 50 new books over the year.

“The kids just love to read,” Leamon said.

These days, the department visits eleven sites—nine at public housing communities—about every six weeks, Leamon said. The frequency and the expansion of RPD Reads and Star City Reads give the department a reason to “essentially stay there” and build positive relationships, Leamon said. Being at public housing complexes shows residents that they can depend on police and that police “aren’t all bad,” he said. Police departments must think out of the box to improve relationships in the community, Leamon said, adding Star City Reads is one way to do it.

“You have to listen to the community,” Leamon said. “We want to show that we’re putting in effort.”

Leamon is not the only reader. About 248 officers—over 90 percent of the department—are involved in community service efforts, for which they receive a small pay raise. One qualifying activity is reading at public housing sites.

While reading allows the department to build relationships with children and public housing residents, reading also strengthens the skills among young readers. Statistics have convinced Leamon: If you can get kids reading at grade level, “they’re much less likely to end up in the judicial system,” he said.

One part of Roanoke that has gained attention is Lansdowne Park, the city’s largest and oldest public housing community. *The Roanoke Times* described the area as “one of the most poverty-plagued parts of the city.”¹

The Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority wanted to transform the neighborhood, which had 500 units in Lansdowne and another 200 in Melrose Park, which serves retirees and people with disabilities. With a \$200,000 planning grant to explore the possibilities, the housing authority began asking residents about what they needed.

The need was great: “...80 percent of the people there were jobless. Half had some type of disability. Fifty percent of children there started kindergarten unprepared, compared with 20 percent citywide. Crime well outpaced the rest of the city.” That information, reported in the Roanoke newspaper, was based on data and survey results gathered with the planning grant.

Glenda Edwards Goh, executive director of RRHA since 2008, said Lansdowne is somewhat of an island, creating “an apartness from the community.” When the Star City Reads program began, Goh said it was important that Lansdowne residents be included in the efforts.

Not only have the residents not been left behind, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has recognized RRHA for the collaborative work occurring at the Lansdowne community, with help from partners such as the Roanoke Police Department and others.

RRHA was among the first 36 public housing agencies nationwide that signed on to the Book-Rich Environment Initiative, which provides diverse, high quality books, and literacy supports to the public housing authorities. The Book-Rich Environment Initiative was launched in January 2017 through a collaboration of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Education, a move applauded by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

Crystal Hall, RRHA’s director of community support services, said being a part of the Book-Rich Environment Initiative adds to other existing efforts—such as after-school programs and job skills programs—that have been underway to help families living in public housing. Hall agreed with others that children with good reading skills have a better chance of graduating from high school and fulfilling their potential.

“(Without these programs), you’re pretty much dooming them to a certain lifestyle when they’re older,” Hall said, noting the importance of nearly 50 partners helping residents gain self-sufficiency.

Retiree Duane Smith, who is president of both the Melrose Towers Civic League and the Joint Residents

Council, which represents the voices of public housing residents citywide, said bringing Star City Reads to public housing agency sites was the right move.

In these roles, Smith said he has thought a lot about residents living in public housing. He thinks about the perceptions that others have of residents simply because of where they live. He wants to see those perceptions change.

“For it to be a success, it has to be a success for the entire city,” he said of the reading initiative.

During the near decade that Smith has been involved in public housing issues, he has witnessed a shift from just providing housing to addressing the needs of the individuals. Residents are now asked during annual meetings what skills they need and what progress they are making, he said. At Lansdowne, residents have access to a program that equips residents with job and educational skills they may not have had previously, he said.

“We owe it to those people who don’t have those skills,” Smith said. “Pride is a powerful thing. Most people don’t want to divulge they can’t read.”

Before he moved into the retirement complex Melrose Towers, Smith owned a business and worked upper-level management jobs. He said he never worried about money. If he had a need, he just picked up a third job. When people approached him for help, “I was quick to write a check.” After his health failed, he reflected on those earlier conversations; Smith said they weren’t really asking for his money. They wanted his guidance and leadership.

Now, he uses his time to serve in a variety of leadership roles, including as a commissioner and former board chair of the RRHA Board of Commissioners. In these roles, Smith said he has thought a lot about residents living in public housing. He thinks about the perceptions that others have of residents simply because of where they live. He wants to see those perceptions change.

“Public housing was meant to be a stepping stone,” Smith said. “What you’ve ended up with is generational poverty.”

At Lansdowne, the federally-funded Jobs Plus program offers residents the opportunity to gain vocational skills. The Joint Residents Council—a nonprofit in its own right—is exploring how to provide 24-hour child care so that residents can take jobs on later shifts, he said.

While gaining job skills and opportunities is one way to help public housing residents, Smith said he sees literacy as another way to put a “big dent” in the poverty problem. Several housing authority sites offer child care centers, where people work with young children on reading skills.

The one-stop approach that will be used at the Melrose library branch is one of the results of Star City Reads partners talking to each other and listening to residents, who cited transportation as a major barrier.

“Once you get that kid reading, then there’s really no stopping,” Smith said.

Since Star City Reads was introduced, Smith said he has noticed greater cohesion among all civic organizations in Roanoke. Leaders of local organizations realize “if we work together, we can achieve more,” he said.

One of the most visible signs of renewal and collaboration in the Lansdowne neighborhood will be a new library branch.

“This new library is going to be a huge (investment),” Smith said. “That shows there’s an urgency to improve the lives of our young people in that area.”

Umberger said a portion of a nearby Goodwill property is being renovated for the branch, which will provide community meeting space, a private space to give immunizations, and an office for Blue Ridge Literacy, a tutoring program. The location also will

have more computers than any other branch. The one-stop approach that will be used at the Melrose library branch is one of the results of Star City Reads partners talking to each other and listening to residents, who cited transportation as a major barrier.

For Umberger, it all goes back to working on behalf of children, wherever they live.

“When you do a good job, you’ve made an impact on that child,” Umberger said. “We say one child at a time, help one family at a time.”

Note

1. Matt Chittum, “Roanoke to Press On, Despite Losing Bid for Grant to Overhaul Dated Public Housing,” *Roanoke Times*, October 14, 2015. http://www.roanoke.com/news/local/roanoke/roanoke-to-press-on-despite-losing-bid-for-grant-to/article_1ea87649-4361-5cda-8360-f6d-c36fcc384.html.

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