



More than 150 Communities Pledge to Make Early Reading an Urgent Priority

Contact: [Kathleen Kennedy Manzo](#) or [Phyllis Jordan](#); 301-656-0348

WASHINGTON, Oct. 17, 2011--Mayors, county officials, and other civic leaders from more than 150 U.S. communities have agreed to target early literacy as an urgent priority, recognizing that children who don't learn to read well by the end of third grade are more likely to struggle academically and less likely to finish high school.

The cities and counties, representing 36 states and millions of school children, are addressing what is clearly a national crisis: A full two thirds of U.S. students fail to become proficient readers in the early grades, and schools cannot fix this problem without community support.

The communities--ranging from big cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Baltimore to smaller places like El Dorado, Kansas--are developing strategies to tackle three underlying issues that have consistently kept children from learning to read well:

- school readiness -- too many children are entering kindergarten already behind
- school attendance -- too many young children are missing too many days of school
- summer learning -- too many children are losing ground academically over the summer

The cities and counties (read the list [here](#)) have signaled their intent to apply for the 2012 All-America City Awards, which will go to those that develop the most comprehensive, realistic, and sustainable plans to deal with these three challenges.

A pact between the National Civic League and the foundation-led Campaign for Grade-Level Reading allows these communities to join the Campaign's network, which will provide assistance throughout the application process and help cities develop community-wide plans for improving reading achievement by the end of third grade. These localities will also be on the radar screen for the Campaign's 80 foundations and philanthropic donors, who fund early childhood and early learning and literacy projects.

The concerted local action comes at a time when states and the federal government are paying particular attention to early education through legislation and grant programs. It also complements efforts underway by United Way Worldwide and the National League of Cities, both key partners in the Campaign. Other major partners include the United States Conference of Mayors, America's Promise Alliance, and the Council for a Strong America, whose Mission: Readiness affiliate brings a strong national security message to the Campaign and other efforts to improve the prospects of the nation's youngest children.

"We've put a stake in the ground to cut the number of high school dropouts in the U.S. by half, and we know that boosting reading proficiency by the end of third grade is critical to meeting our goal," said Brian A. Gallagher, president and CEO of United Way Worldwide.

The national movement focusing on grade-level reading responds to a "call to action" issued by a special Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT report, Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters. The 2010 report underscored the troubling data on student achievement and poverty: Only 17 percent of low-income children scored proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Half of them hadn't even mastered basic reading skills.

Children who don't read well by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers, 2011 research shows. Poverty compounds the problem: Poor children who don't read proficiently early on are 13 times more likely not to finish high school than good readers who have never lived in poverty, according to Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.

"Those numbers are catastrophic and they bode ill for those children," said Ralph Smith, the Casey foundation senior vice president who is managing director of the Campaign. "They bode ill for their families. They bode ill for our communities, and they bode ill for the nation as a whole.

"Clearly, we must hold schools accountable for helping all children achieve. But schools cannot succeed alone. We need to bring together communities to help solve these problems."

The All-America City Award is given annually to 10 communities recognized for outstanding civic accomplishment, with an emphasis on innovation, inclusiveness, and collaboration among community leaders. It does not come with a cash prize, but cities have touted it to attract new businesses and seek higher credit ratings. The Campaign will provide assistance to cities to develop their final applications, which are due in March. Finalists will be selected by April, and the winners will be announced in June.

"Any community that works collectively and passionately to get all children reading and succeeding in school will see tremendous benefits," said Gloria Rubio-Cortes, president of the National Civic League. "Regardless of whether a community wins, this process will allow places across the country to develop ambitious, doable, and coherent plans that can help close the academic achievement gaps, improve graduation rates and guarantee a better future for our children."

The local push complements what state and federal leaders are doing to improve early learning:

On Tuesday, U.S. Sens. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Michael Enzi (R-Wyoming) will begin mark-up on a plan to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA). The draft plan includes provisions for early learning.

On Wednesday, as many as 43 states will submit applications for \$500 million in grants from the federal Early Learning Challenge Fund. The program, administered jointly by the U.S. Education and Health and Human

Services departments, will reward states with the best plans to improve learning in the years before a child arrives at kindergarten.

"City leaders are uniquely positioned to champion local efforts to boost early reading proficiency, which can not only bridge the achievement gap and reduce dropout rates, but will also strengthen a city's workforce and advance its broader economic development agenda," said Clifford Johnson, executive director of NLC's Institute for Youth, Education and Families. "We are excited to lend our support and resources to cities participating in the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading."

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a collaborative effort by dozens of funders across the nation to: close the gap in reading achievement that separates many low-income students from their peers; raise the bar for reading proficiency so that all students are assessed by world-class standards; and ensure that all children, including and especially children from low-income families, have an equitable opportunity to meet those higher standards. For more information, visit www.gradelevelreading.net.

The National Civic League is the home of the All-America City Award, an honor achieved by more than 600 communities across the country. NCL is a 117-year-old nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that strengthens democracy by increasing the capacity of groups and individuals to participate in and build healthy and prosperous communities. NCL publishes the Model City Charter and the National Civic Review, and conducts programs, research and technical assistance on topics like fiscal sustainability, transportation-oriented development, environmental stewardship, racial equity and immigrant integration. www.ncl.org
www.allamericacityaward.com

The National League of Cities is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for 19,000 cities, towns and villages, representing more than 218 million Americans.

United Way Worldwide is a worldwide network in 40 countries and territories, including more than 1,200 local organizations in the U.S. It advances the common good, creating opportunities for a better life for all by focusing on the three key building blocks of education, income and health. United Way recruits people and organizations who bring the passion, expertise and resources needed to get things done. LIVE UNITED® is a call to action for everyone to become a part of the change. For more information about United Way, please visit: LIVEUNITED.org.

Kathleen Kennedy Manzo
Phyllis Jordan
301-656-0348
kathleen@thehatchergroup.com
phyllis@thehatchergroup.com