

An Introduction to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

BY RALPH SMITH

In June 2011, I had the great pleasure of announcing a new partnership among the National League of Cities, United States Conference of Mayors, United Way Worldwide, and the National Civic League focused on the All-America City Awards. With more than 700 people gathered at NCL's annual conference in Kansas City, we proudly announced that the 2012 awards would be part of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and that the awards would focus exclusively on honoring ten communities that have developed the most comprehensive, realistic, and sustainable plans to increase reading proficiency by the end of third grade. In 2015, we will honor another set of ten communities that make the most progress and move the needle on this critical educational milestone for young people.

The announcement was received enthusiastically, and the magnitude of the reading proficiency problem in the United States is beginning to be well understood across the country. Recent scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrate that 67 percent of all fourth-grade students and 83 percent of all low-income fourth-grade students score below proficient in reading. Too few U.S. students graduate from high school prepared for college, careers, civic and governmental leadership, and military service. A major contributor to this problem is the fact that a large number of children have not achieved reading proficiency before completing third grade. Because this is the point when educators expect children to pivot from "learning to read" to also "reading to learn," missing this critical target has continuing and significant consequences for future success in school, work, and life.

Now the real work begins in communities across the country as municipal leaders in various sectors start the process of building coalitions and developing concrete plans to tackle the grade-level reading challenge. Over the next year, local elected officials, United Way representatives, school district officials, community foundations, community-based

organizations, and business and nonprofit leaders will focus on executing strategies in three major areas that have significant potential to drive improvements in grade-level reading:

1. *School readiness.* Too many young children show up for school not ready to learn.
2. *School attendance.* Too many children in grades K–3 miss too many days of school.
3. *Summer learning.* Too many children in the early grades lose academic ground over the summer months.

These three focus areas were selected because they each contribute to the problem of low levels of reading proficiency in American children, particularly in low-income communities. These challenges also lend themselves especially well to evidence-based, community-driven solutions that produce significant impact in a relatively short time period. The campaign is encouraging communities to solve these problems at scale comprehensively and concurrently.

There have been other local, state, and national efforts in the past to set goals around the improvement of reading proficiency for young children. There have also been small-scale investments in efforts to improve attendance and develop model early childhood and summer learning programs that now have evidence of impact and effectiveness. However, there has never been a concerted effort to link these issues explicitly to reading proficiency and to align all such investments from the perspective of children and families who struggle to navigate various systems and programs designed to serve children from birth to eight years old. Moreover, there are few communities that are currently addressing any one of these three challenges at scale, let alone all three simultaneously. This is precisely what the campaign seeks to address.

Research clearly demonstrates that low-income children are read to and spoken to less often than

middle-income children and are less likely to attend high-quality early childhood and prekindergarten programs. Many low-income children may hear as many as 30 million fewer words in their very early years. As a result, they have much smaller vocabularies—and vocabulary as early as age three can predict third-grade reading comprehension and achievement. There are proven practices and quality program models that could be brought to scale in communities that would ensure higher levels of kindergarten readiness.

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Recent studies also show that one in ten kindergarten and first-grade students nationwide miss nearly a month of school each year, and the proportion is significantly higher in many poor districts. These students cannot afford the reduced learning time and fall farther behind with each passing year. Among low-income children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of fifth grade—and starts a cycle of frustration, failure, and more absences that in turn creates a grave risk of dropping out of school. Effective strategies being used in cities across the country actually reduce the number of students who are chronically absent in the early grades.

Low-income children, who often are already behind, also lose as much as two months of reading achievement over the summer; by ninth grade, cumulative summer loss can account for more than half the achievement gap in reading skills. By calling attention to this problem and investing in affordable, quality summer learning programs, communities are transforming summers from seasons of setbacks to seasons of expanded opportunities and horizons.

In the long run, realizing the promise of sustainable improvement in student achievement means ensuring quality teaching in every setting that a child experiences. Schools, early childhood centers, and other programs that serve children also need strong leadership and support that enables them to create environments for learning that promote success. But as we strive to improve the quality of teaching and leadership, we must also recognize that the community around these institutions must expect, advocate for, and help families and the schools nurture children's healthy development and academic accomplishment. Parents, concerned citizens, agencies and community organizations, businesses, and civic leaders have invaluable roles to play.

That is why the campaign calls for broad-based community engagement to harness the energy, imagination, and local knowledge of citizens to identify, implement, and own community solutions to the problems that stand in the way of student success. By focusing on these solutions together, we can *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 equity* so that all children have the opportunity to meet those higher standards.

For more details about the 2012 All-America City Grade-Level Reading Award, please visit www.allamericacityaward.com/. If your community is ready for the challenge, start preparing now to launch your local grade-level reading campaign. If you have any questions about the campaign or need technical assistance in conjunction with the award application, please contact Ron Fairchild at 443-986-1275 or rfairchild@gradelevelreading.net or visit www.gradelevelreading.net.

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