

# United Way's Focus on Early Grade Reading

BY STACEY D. STEWART

Across the country, United Ways are stepping up to the challenge of improving grade-level reading, galvanizing communities to give, advocate, and volunteer to support children struggling in school (especially children of color and from low-wage families).

This effort is rooted in United Way's "Goals for the Common Good," a call to action for individuals and organizations to get involved and help improve the conditions in our nation by focusing on the building blocks of a good life: education, income, and health. We've set out a goal for United Ways and their partners to help cut in half the number of high school dropouts. And we know that boosting reading proficiency by the end of third grade is critical to our mission.

We are working to engage everyday Americans in this effort. Our recent nationwide community conversations and public opinion affirm that the public knows that students, schools, and teachers need support. Americans believe that the futures of schools and communities are interconnected. People want to help but aren't sure how.

That's why United Way is asking 1 million people to step up over the next three years to volunteer as a reader, tutor, or mentor to boost a young person's academic achievement. (Find out more at [www.liveunited.org/volunteer](http://www.liveunited.org/volunteer).) We're putting a special focus on volunteering to support literacy and pre-literacy skills, from birth through third grade.

When we launched this effort on our fourth annual United Way Day of Action in June, more than two hundred United Ways representing all fifty states mobilized volunteers around education. With the support of Target and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we brought together more than a thousand volunteers, from Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia, on the National Mall to assemble 50,000 summer reading

backpacks. Some 150,000 books for kindergarteners through fourth graders went to schools and summer programs in the Washington, D.C., area.

We targeted summer reading because we know low-income students lose about two months of achievement in reading during the summer while their middle-class counterparts make gains. And because adults are so critical to supporting summer learning, backpacks included resources for families, including tips on how to make reading more interesting and fun. And as the nation's largest funder of before- and after-school programs, we have a unique opportunity to work with those programs to make sure they are available to the students who most need them during the school year and during the summer and to also infuse these programs with engaging and enriching strategies for boosting children's reading and love of learning.

This education volunteer call to action is part of our effort to cut high school dropout rates. But it's also in response to the findings from our recent report, "Voices for the Common Good: America Speaks Out on Education." This report is based on United Way's recent community listening tour, focus groups, and a national survey which found that that 91 percent of respondents believe that "we as a community have to take greater responsibility for what's happening with our children."

In hundreds of community conversations convened by United Ways, Americans told us that they want to work with others to improve education in this country but don't know exactly what to do. They see involvement in schools as crucial—and they see it eroding. As one person said, "People adopt free-ways all day long. How about adopting a school?" In our survey, almost seven of ten people say they are willing to volunteer for education, and they're looking for organizations that can help create clear pathways for them to act that are tied to large-scale change.

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That's a role that our national network, with more than twelve hundred state and local United Ways, can play. United Ways are good at recruiting people and organizations who bring the passion, resources, and expertise—from all across the community—to get things done.

Because third-grade reading proficiency is a pivotal skill, it's one of the "vital few" education issues on which United Way Worldwide is focusing. We're developing national partnerships, strategies, and projects on early grade reading, along with tools and learning opportunities to help United Ways fuel the community collaboration needed to make long-term, community-wide change in this area.

That's the context for our partnership with the National Civic League, National League of Cities, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors focused on the 2012 All America City award. United Way will broadly share information about the award with and through our network, encouraging communities to apply. We will also provide technical assistance to help cities and their partners form the right partnerships and improve outcomes for young children as they work to compete for the award.

More than two hundred United Ways have identified early grade reading as a priority, and even more than that (nearly 90 percent of all U.S. United Ways) work on school readiness. Many are playing a role in developing community-wide strategies, building coalitions, bringing diverse stakeholders together, helping gather critical data (including attendance and school readiness data), and elevating the issue to build public awareness and political will to support early grade reading. They're also finding innovative ways to maximize their funder role: United Ways are beginning to leverage their position as one of the nation's biggest funders of out-of-school-time programs by insisting on high-quality programs that include literacy components.

More and more are working with parents, educators, and business and community partners to develop community-wide strategies to support reading, including recruiting volunteer readers, tutors, and mentors in classrooms, after-school, and summer programs.

- In Indianapolis, United Way of Central Indiana's elementary education strategies focus on ensuring kids that are healthy, attending class, and reading at grade level by sixth grade. Building on a foundation of early learning, early literacy, and school readiness efforts, ReadUP, a collaboration between United Way and Indianapolis Public Schools (supported by Eli Lilly and other corporate partners), provides volunteer reading tutors to directly impact children's academic success. ReadUP tutors spend one hour each week (or every other week, if they're working with a partner) working with elementary schoolers who need help the most. ReadUP has also become a major community focus, with public service ads, an endorsement from the head coach of the NFL's Indianapolis Colts, and a public push from the Central Indiana Corporate Volunteer Council. The council, made up of major employers and corporate leaders, has endorsed the initiative. Business leaders are not only giving their employees time off to volunteer, they're making presentations to Indianapolis organizations to ask them to do the same.
- In United Way of Dane County's Schools of Hope Literacy Project in Madison, Wisconsin, volunteers are trained to be tutors, and they coordinate with teachers and school leaders to improve students' reading skills. The results of Dane County's work have been impressive. From 1995 to 2004, the percentage of African American students in Madison reading below grade level dropped from 29 percent to 5 percent.
- Tapping into the retiree community—especially retired teachers—is part of our strategy. The United Way of Greater New Haven, in New Haven, Connecticut, partners with Experience Corps to provide after-school assistance to students through third grade, using adults over age fifty-five as tutors. An evaluation of Experience Corps' impact on over eight hundred students in the early grades across three cities found that, in a single year, students with Experience Corps tutors

made 40 percent more progress on grade-specific reading skills than similar students not served by the program.

- Because virtually every United Way supports school readiness in some form or fashion, building literacy skill development into early childhood education efforts is a strategy many United Ways are pursuing. In Charleston, South Carolina, Trident United Way joined with the local library and its “friends” chapter and the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) to create Born to Read. The goal of this partnership is to provide parents of newborns at MUSC with information on the importance of early literacy to stimulate and to support parents’ efforts to read with their children.

United Ways are also building partnerships with schools and school districts to support ongoing evidence-based professional development in reading instruction. One example of a statewide strategy that local United Way, municipal, and corporate leaders are fueling is the Minnesota Reading Corps. It’s a statewide initiative to help every Minnesota child become a successful reader by the end of third grade. The program places AmeriCorps members in schools to implement a research-based early-literacy effort to help struggling readers. The Minnesota Reading Corps strategies are designed for both preschool-age students and students in kindergarten to the third grade. Minnesota Reading Corps members can choose to serve in a preschool setting or a K–3 setting.

The Greater Twin Cities United Way in Minneapolis and Target, based in Minneapolis, are active partners in this effort. United Way invests in comprehensive strategies that help students learn to read: one-on-one tutoring, parent engagement, and early identification of student needs. For example, United Way is partnering with the Saint Paul public schools to support one-on-one tutoring in more than thirty schools, and with the Bloomington schools as well. More than 7,200 children in kindergarten through third grade have gotten help in learning to read. At the same time, United Way is working with Target to train its associates to be reading tutors and volunteers.

On a national scale, United Way’s National Women’s Leadership Council—comprising some

fifty thousand women leaders in 120 communities across the nation—has endorsed a focus on early grade reading. Women business and philanthropic leaders have embraced the issue and are working with United Ways to support, boost, or develop ways to help young kids read better. Their end game is recruiting 100,000 education volunteers to boost kids’ reading skills.

Of course, United Way isn’t in this work alone. The collaboration—in strategy development and execution—at the local, state, and national level is critical. We’re proud that more than 120 national organizations are our strategic education partners, as are as many global corporate leaders like Target. National organizations allied with our cause include America’s Promise; Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library; First Book; community leaders ranging from the Urban League and Communities in Schools to the Junior League and PTA; associations representing teachers, principals, superintendents and school boards, museums and libraries; National Conference of State Legislatures; youth-serving organizations like MENTOR, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club, and the Ys; faith leaders like the National Alliance for Faith and Justice and the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships; volunteer organizations like Experience Corps, the National Collaboration for Youth and Youth Service America; and leading players in bringing all voices to the debate, including the National Council of La Raza, National Black Child Development Institute, and the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans.

United Way is directing significant resources to mobilize the nation around the critical issue of early grade-level reading. As an organization that generates \$1 billion a year for children and youth and engages more than 2.5 million volunteers, United Way has many feet on the street. We want to maximize every opportunity to highlight the grade-level reading cause. For example, United Way is:

- *Elevating the issue of early grade reading proficiency.* Through our public messaging, on our Web site ([www.liveunited.org](http://www.liveunited.org)), public events like our recent National Education Town Hall and Day of Action event on the National Mall, as well as new public service advertising developed with

the Ad Council, we want to make more Americans aware of the issue.

- *Providing tools, templates, and technical assistance to United Ways to focus on early grade reading.* We highlighted the issue to fifteen hundred United Way leaders at our annual meeting this year and have offered a series of webinars, along with overviews of proven strategies, relevant research, and a volunteer reading guide to help United Ways engage volunteers in early grade reading activities. In addition, we're providing intensive technical assistance to United Ways in seventeen communities across the country—ranging from Denver (whose chief executive officer has coauthored an article in this journal) to the Louisiana community of Monroe—who are working with partners to develop and execute strategies to boost reading proficiency in their communities.
- *Engaging our partners.* We convened an Early Grade Reading Partner Summit and a Mentoring Partner Summit in January, bringing together local and state United Ways with researchers and policy and practice experts on those two issues. With our many national education partners—ranging from libraries, PTAs and teachers to Nickelodeon and Target—we're looking for ways to reinforce grade-level reading proficiency.
- *Leveraging existing resources.* We are building language and literacy into our Born Learning public engagement campaign, which more than a thousand local United Ways and other community organizations have embraced. Born Learning offers public service advertising, parent education materials, and community action tools to help communities build literacy skill development into early childhood strategies, programs, and activities.

We have a long way to go to help United Ways, their partners, and their communities across the country develop and execute community-wide strategies to build up reading proficiency by the end of third grade.

I believe we're making a good start and are headed in the right direction. But there is much to do. Please join us! Visit [liveunited.org/volunteer](http://liveunited.org/volunteer) to get started.

*United Way is a worldwide network in 40 countries and territories, including more than 1,200 local organizations in the United States. It advances*

### **Boosting Summer Reading in Massachusetts Through Collaboration**

The summer usually represents a break from school and can lead to a loss of academic skill and knowledge among students—especially low-income children and young people. In order to keep students engaged, several United Ways in Massachusetts—led by United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley in Boston—joined forces with the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care to form a Summer Literacy Collaborative. The collaborative focused its efforts on creating sustained summer reading and learning opportunities for children and young people throughout the summer break by:

- Forming a public-private partnership—a collaboration between United Ways, nonprofits, and the school system
- Strengthening resources, aligning curriculum, and connecting school and out-of-school-time staff
- Making learning fun through an engaging summer curriculum
- Fostering family involvement, collaboration, and community engagement

Partners carried out different roles. United Way served as the fiscal agent for the project; led the learning community that solved problems; coordinated across hubs; oversaw evaluation; and conducted fundraising, marketing, and public relations. Community Literacy Coordinators at each hub oversaw the program and partnerships with schools at sites. Trained school literacy coaches mentored and trained out-of-school-time staff and linked the program to school personnel and curricula. Program staff supervised children, promoted engagement, and partnered with families and schools.

In its first foray, the Summer Literacy Collaborative featured twenty-one sites with 1,822 participating children. This translated into nearly 2,000 hours of literacy activities and 2,080 hours of coaching for children and families.

Participating children experienced several benefits, including:

- Avoiding typical learning loss (85 percent)
- Maintaining or increasing reading skills (72 percent)
- Increasing reading skills (68 percent)

*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](http://LIVEUNITED.org).*

## Volunteer Tutors Step Up in Grand Rapids

The Heart of West Michigan United Way in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is zeroing in on first through third graders in its poorest neighborhoods. Its Schools of Hope initiative is modeled after Dane County United Way's work in Madison, Wisconsin, which has begun to close the racial achievement gap there.

The Grand Rapids community has come together around nine hundred young students who need the most help. Some twelve hundred community volunteers, including college students and retirees, work one on one with kids in schools for thirty minutes a week. More than sixty companies give employees paid time off to mentor. Congregations host after-school and family literacy programs.

Training and support are a critical piece of the effort. Each tutor attends a two-hour training session, held throughout the week at different locations to accommodate volunteers' schedules. A literacy coordinator provides expanded trainings for tutors upon request. School-based staff members prepare materials and lesson plans for the tutor and assist as needed. Schools, teachers, and volunteers work together seamlessly.

Schools of Hope conducts pre- and posttests to monitor progress of participating students. So far, students in the

Schools of Hope program are making greater reading gains than their peers. And those in the after-school program are gaining a full eighteen months' worth of academic growth in just nine months.

But these voices from Grand Rapids give another view of the program's impact so far:

Schools of Hope builds confidence in children. They don't believe they can do it until someone else believes in them.  
*Misti Stanton, Schools of Hope Coordinator at Brookside and Harrison Park schools*

When we survey our teachers and ask what programs have the most impact on student achievement, the reading tutor program always is at the top.

*Maryann Prisichenko, Principal, Sibley Elementary*  
I never used to read books. I didn't even like reading, but now I enjoy reading. I feel good about myself because I learned how to read better all because of my mentor.

*Child who participates in Schools of Hope*  
My weekly visits are the highlight of my week. I have grown so much from the experience. The children open themselves up and work so hard. It gives me strong feelings of hope about their futures as well as the future of our community.

*Mike Pfennig, Schools of Hope Reading Tutor*

## References

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