



School Readiness: Insights From GLR Communities

DRAFT Prepared for Discussion and Development

PRACTICE BRIEF #5

THE PROBLEM

Just as there is an achievement gap in school performance, there is a school readiness gap that separates disadvantaged children from their more affluent peers. As early as 18 months, low-income children begin to fall behind in vocabulary development and other skills critical for school success.

Research shows that learning begins long before a child enters kindergarten. Children — even infants — soak up words, rhymes, songs and images. Vocabulary development is particularly important. A child's health, and the timely recognition of developmental delays, is another critical aspect of school readiness. Without a comprehensive, systematic, community-wide commitment to ensuring school readiness, children from low-income families may start school behind, leaving many in a perpetual struggle to catch up academically.

44%

Early childhood classrooms in Virginia Beach which completed the LENA Grow program saw a 44% increase in adult words and a 40% increase in daily conversational turns.

\$10M

The New Orleans, LA, GLR Campaign coalition leveraged the city's investment in early childhood education to gain an additional \$10 million each year in state, federal and private funds, leading to a 38% increase in the number of infants and toddlers served.



SOLUTIONS: WHAT'S WORKING IN GLR COMMUNITIES

This practice brief shares our analysis of 93 stories filed by 51 communities in 27 states and one Canadian province that focus specifically on what GLR Campaign communities are doing to move the needle on school readiness.

The communities represented in the stories include two rural counties and/or small towns located in two states (Oregon and West Virginia). The stories also feature large urban areas such as Cincinnati and San Antonio as well as countywide or regional efforts that include a mix of urban, rural and suburban populations.

We identified five broad strategies as being important ingredients in efforts by local GLR Campaigns to move the needle on school readiness:

- 1 Supporting parent success as a critical piece of school readiness
- 2 Building on book distribution to provide more comprehensive programming
- 3 Expanding services and programming for children and families
- 4 Aligning and coordinating early childhood education (ECE) into a more well-developed system
- 5 Building the capacity of early childhood providers

**93 STORIES FILED BY 51 COMMUNITIES IN 27 STATES AND ONE CANADIAN PROVINCE
FOCUS SPECIFICALLY ON WHAT GLR CAMPAIGN COMMUNITIES ARE DOING TO MOVE THE
NEEDLE ON SCHOOL READINESS.**

LANE COUNTY, OR

Kids in Transition to School (KITS) provides a strength-based holistic program delivered through 24 classes for targeted children and 12 workshops for parents.

Strategy 1: Supporting parent success as a critical piece of school readiness. GLR Campaign communities recognize the importance of empowering parents and see it as especially important in the early years so that parents feel successful as their child’s first and most important teacher. Communities are working to reach families where they are — whether in pediatrician’s offices, libraries, playgroups or at home. Using trusted relationships and partners or building that trust themselves GLR Campaign coalitions see parents as invaluable partners and work with families to build skills that lead to early school success. The following stories illustrate some of the ways communities are working closely with parents:

- Empowering parents is a hallmark of the school readiness work in the Suncoast region of Florida. The four GLR communities in the region use engagement events to introduce families to [Vroom](#), an app that helps parents and caregivers be their child’s first best teacher. The Suncoast region is consistently in the top 12 in the country for success with Vroom. In addition, Soar in 4, a program coordinated by the Manatee County School District, hosts family events focused on the arts, block play and maker activities and literacy. This two-gen approach builds readiness skills, supports parents and aligns with classroom curriculum. Learn more [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).
- In Lane County, Oregon, Kids in Transition to School (KITS) provides a strength-based holistic program delivered through 24 classes for targeted children and 12 workshops for parents. In addition to preparing children for school, the program has been “shown to help parents learn effective parenting skills and created positive relationships between parents and school staff, which led to greater parental involvement in the school during the kindergarten year.” When the United Way lost some of the funding for the program, school districts, which saw the critical value of the program, were able to find the funds to keep (and in some cases) expand the program. Learn more [here](#).

- The Building Healthy Families coalition in rural Wallowa County, Oregon, provides a multitude of opportunities for parents to participate in and engage with their children. The coalition ensures that developmentally appropriate activities for 4- and 5-year-olds are made available in play groups, home visits, medical waiting rooms and in-home daycares as well as through targeted workshops and as take home activities. Their goal is to flood their community with school readiness activities. Learn more [here](#).
- The school readiness work in Louisville, Kentucky, has a commitment to developmental screening that includes follow-up connections to services for children with delays. Their work with community organizations that serve as trusted partners has allowed them to have success reaching families in neighborhood settings where many of the children are not participating in any child care or pre-K programs, often some of the hardest to reach families. In the neighborhoods targeted for this outreach, school readiness increased from 32%–44% in 2015–2016 to 38%–49% in 2018–2019. Learn more [here](#).

Strategy 2: Building on book distribution to provide more comprehensive programming. Many communities acknowledge that increasing access to books is an important piece of their school readiness strategies. These communities use events and places where books are made available such as a book give-aways, book nooks and literacy buses to leverage opportunities to engage with parents around early learning, deepen relationships with early child care providers and others in the community and expand developmental screenings. Here are some creative strategies communities are using:

- In Shawnee County, Kansas, the Learn and Play bus extends the reach of the local library to high-need areas with a focus on school readiness. In addition to having more access to books and literacy activities, families are able to engage in play together, have developmental screenings for their young children and get connected to other resources. Read more [here](#). Similarly, in Lafayette, Mississippi, the L.O.U. Reads coalition sponsors the Literacy Bus Program, increasing access to books for many families and connecting with families through fun events. Learn more [here](#).

LOUISVILLE, KY

Community organizers used developmental screenings to reach families in neighborhoods where many children are not participating in child care or pre-K programs. In these neighborhoods school readiness increased from 32%–44% in 2015–2016 to 38%–49% in 2018–2019.

CINCINNATI, OH

Kindergarten Readiness Assessments (KRA) given to children showed that “58.3% of the 2018–19 KRA cohort were on-track in literacy compared to 50.9% of the 2017–cohort and 42.9% of the 2016–17 cohort — an increase of 15.4 percentage points from Year 1 to Year 3.”

- In Cincinnati, Ohio, a unique pairing of Reach Out and Read with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (ROR/IL) has been shown to increase home literacy practices and parent engagement as well as increasing enthusiasm about books and reading. Pediatricians and nurse practitioners incorporate messages about the importance of reading in their visits and write “prescriptions” for books. Families eligible for Medicaid are enrolled in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library at that time. In addition, Kindergarten Readiness Assessments (KRA) given to children showed that “58.3% of the 2018–19 KRA cohort were on-track in literacy compared to 50.9% of the 2017–2018 cohort and 42.9% of the 2016–2017 cohort — an increase of 15.4 percentage points from Year 1 to Year 3.” Learn more [here](#) and see evaluation results [here](#).
- In Council Bluffs, Iowa, the Raise me to Read coalition applied for and received book credits through First Book. Working with early child care providers, CB-RMTR helped ensure that early child care providers were able to bolster their literacy efforts as well as get books to families that needed them the most. At the same time, the coalition built stronger connections with the early child care providers, making additional partnerships more likely. Learn more [here](#).

Strategy 3: Expanding services and programming for children and families. As research continues to show the importance of early childhood education, communities are coming together to advocate for an expansion of early childhood education and preschool seats. These communities are examples of those that have been successful in expanding services in their cities and towns.

- In 2017, by engaging the coalition’s more than 70 partners, the New Orleans GLR Campaign started addressing the lack of access to early childhood education slots for families by successfully advocating for \$750,000 in the New Orleans city budget to go to infant and toddler ECE seats. Every year since, the investment has doubled leading to 427 new seats and wrap-around services. In addition, the coalition

leveraged the city's investment in early childhood education to gain an additional \$10 million each year in state, federal and private funds, leading to a 38% increase in number infants and toddlers served. Learn more [here](#).

- In San Antonio, Texas, partners throughout the city used EDI (early development instrument) data in a planning process designed to create a common set of outcomes, focus efforts and align strategic investment toward the agreed-upon outcomes. The new initiative is called ReadyKidsSA. After rallying partners around a common agenda, the lead partners, United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County and the City of San Antonio, worked with other funders who invested in early childhood education to focus their giving around the common outcomes to see greater impact. Learn more [here](#).
- Ottumwa, Iowa, opened the new Pickwick Early Childhood Center in 2018. The facility combines Head Start, Title I and other funding to provide a seat to any child. Classroom assignments aren't based on funding so all students are integrated. Demand has been high and the program continues to expand. Learn more [here](#).
- In 2016, Dayton, Ohio, voters passed a city income tax increase. Preschool Promise provides an assurance of one year of affordable quality preschool to 4-year-olds and is expanding to six other Montgomery County communities this year. In addition, Preschool Promise focuses on improving teacher quality and culturally responsive practices as well as getting the word out about the importance of preschool. Learn more [here](#).
- In Black Hills, South Dakota, Black Hills Reads (BHR) has taken on the Early Learning Nation work developed by the National League of Cities and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, creating a toolkit with a rural focus that has been used by communities throughout the state to raise awareness, move public will. BHR also made funding available for communities committed to creating plans around school readiness. Learn more [here](#).

I IN DAYTON, OH, PRESCHOOL PROMISE PROVIDES AN ASSURANCE OF ONE YEAR OF AFFORDABLE QUALITY PRESCHOOL TO 4-YEAR-OLDS AND IS EXPANDING TO COVER SIX OTHER MONTGOMERY COUNTY COMMUNITIES THIS YEAR.

With over 30 DRIVE (Data and Resources Investing in Vital Early Education Initiative) partners,

OVER 3,000 CHILDREN

have been screened in Boston.

Strategy 4: Aligning and coordinating early childhood education (ECE) into a more well-developed system. Recognizing the importance of aligned goals, practices and curricula for the ECE field, GLR Campaign coalitions are leading and supporting this work in their communities. They are also finding creative ways to support early childhood educators by providing professional development opportunities, making those opportunities more accessible and supporting credentialing. Here are some stories that address this strategy:

- In Nashville, Tennessee, the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success (BECS) lays out the plan to double the number of children reading on grade level in third grade. One part of achieving this goal has been to better equip early childhood educators with the tools they need to support student literacy. BECS convened a work group from the ECE providers in the city whose work led to a plan to make professional development more accessible and high quality. The professional development was created with Lipscomb Ayers Institute and can be found at edutoolbox.org. Learn more [here](#).
- Virginia Beach, Virginia, is using [LENA Grow](#) with early care providers. Participating early care professionals had 10 coaching sessions and use a talk pedometer as a helpful tracking tool. Early childhood classrooms that completed Grow saw a 44% increase in adult words and a 40% increase in daily conversational turns. Virginia Beach has also added a language focus to their home visiting program, equipping families with information about LENA Grow and LENA Home tools. Learn more [here](#) and [here](#).
- In Boston, Massachusetts, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay developed DRIVE (Data and Resources Investing in Vital Early Education) Initiative to build a community-level dataset. DRIVE has trained partners on using the ASQ/ASQ:SE, when to refer children for additional services and how to analyze program-level data for continuous quality improvement. With over 30 DRIVE partners, over 3,000 children have been screened. Read more [here](#).

- Childcare Resources of Indian River partnered with Indian River State College to expand their Credentialing Program for Early Educators (CPEE) to offer a Director’s Credential. Participants used project-based learning and toured high-quality child care centers with a focus that emphasized enrichment beyond current standards. Learn more about Indian River County, Florida’s program [here](#).
- Acknowledging that a fragmented system of instructional resources would provide inequitable experiences for children in the city, the coalition in Springfield, Massachusetts, brought together a wide range of ECE providers with early childhood experts at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to create a common preschool curriculum that included a coaching component for teachers. A promising implementation study showed high outcomes for children in this program. Learn more [here](#).

Strategy 5: Building the capacity of early childhood providers. Communities are finding creative ways to support ECE providers — whether supporting programs with volunteers or working with providers to uncover and lift up successful curricula and best practices.

- Read Charlotte, in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Child Care Resources Inc. developed a demonstration project (2017–2020) called Ready to Read. The project targeted child care programs outside of Head Start and public pre-K as these programs had less access to early literacy coaching and intervention. The project included — among other supports — an evidence-based literacy curriculum and literacy coaches with a goal of understanding how to build classroom routines that improve student emergent literacy skills in child care settings. Both child and adult outcomes for this literacy intervention were positive and the effect sizes appear to match or exceed results of comparative interventions. Learn more [here](#).
- Preschool classes in Camden, New Jersey, benefit from AmeriCorps members (Promise Corps NJ) who, in partnership with the teacher, provide one-on-one and small group learning to students across the city. This additional support helps maximize learning for students. In addition, the Camden coalition has successfully recruited parents, grandparents and students from the community who are personally invested in success for students in their community. Learn more [here](#).
- In Des Moines, Iowa, the Book Buddies initiative provides one-on-one reading partners for preschool children. The pairs work together twice a week for 30 minutes. The 26 books used in the program become a part of the classroom library and teachers integrate the concepts into classroom learning as well. Each child also takes the books home with family activities. Learn more [here](#).

Note: Many community coalitions are providing programming during the summer to ease the transition from pre-K to kindergarten or assist young children who need more support to be ready for kindergarten. You can read more about these programs in the *Summer & Afterschool Learning Practice Brief* [here](#).

TAKEAWAYS

Below are key insights garnered from our review of these stories:

- 1** Successful strategies for parent success around school readiness meet parents where they are at and use asset-based activities and programs to bolster the knowledge, skills and behaviors parents can use to be their child's first and best teacher and advocate.
- 2** Book giveaways and other events and activities related to access to literacy materials for young children and families can extend and enhance their effectiveness when tied to efforts to engage directly with parents, connect families with other resources and deepen coalition partnerships.
- 3** Partnerships between public agencies, private funders and other organizations and coalitions are an effective way to rally public will and support for systemic investment in early childhood education and pre-K programs.
- 4** With the many demands faced by early childhood education providers and the often fragmented nature of the field in many areas, GLR Campaign communities are working to provide aligned systems and curriculum, package back-end services and support programs with volunteers, all with an overall goal of elevating quality in the early childhood education field.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FOR PARENT SUCCESS AROUND SCHOOL READINESS MEET PARENTS WHERE THEY ARE.

WE HAVE AN URGENT IMPERATIVE TO CONSIDER HOW WE MIGHT COLLECTIVELY APPLY WHAT'S WORKING TO MOVE THE NEEDLE ON SCHOOL READINESS TO THE BROADER LEARNING LOSS CHALLENGE CREATED BY COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

Some key questions we will be addressing in our upcoming Roundtable Conversation and follow-on Community of Practice on this topic include:

- How did communities actually do what's described above?
- What did it take to get funders and organizations to align and coordinate their efforts?
- What will it take to sustain their commitment when emergency needs and other priorities tug at their heart strings and purse strings?
- And what are the implications and potential strategies for bolstering ECE providers (many of whom have taken a financial hit) during COVID-19 related shutdowns as well as the losses both in education and other related services that so many young children and their families face?

We have an urgent imperative to consider how we might collectively apply what's working to move the needle on school readiness to the broader learning loss challenge created by COVID-19 pandemic. There clearly is an opportunity for us think together about how to transform some of the practices outlined in this brief into effective approaches that can still be carried out virtually and/or as part of a physically distanced experience. We intend for these stories to serve as a platform and starting point for a more concerted, network-driven effort to bring additional energy, talent, innovation and imagination to:

- Mitigate the major challenge presented by an unprecedented increase in the number of children who will enter the 2020 school year without a full year of Head Start or pre-K;
- Reverse the potentially catastrophic learning loss being experienced by a large proportion of young children who will not derive the full benefits of remote activities and learning; and
- Seize this moment of heightened awareness of parents as teachers of last resort to elevate a commitment to embracing parents as essential partners in attaining good outcomes for their children.

- The GLR *What's Working Practice Briefs* are designed to be an actionable resource for GLR coalitions and leaders in communities and states across the network that are looking for relevant examples and ideas about what to implement, adapt, improve and expand as they seek to move the needle on key measures of early school success.
- The Briefs in this collection contain curated content from 112 communities that filed more than 320 stories in early 2020 about what's working well and why. Each of the six Briefs is organized around one of the key impact areas that have been part of the GLR Campaign's Community Solutions Action Plan (CSAP) framework used by 300+ communities since 2012.
- The authors of each brief have both subject-matter expertise and extensive experience working with and supporting GLR communities. In compiling these Briefs, we view our roles as that of active listeners, aggregators and guides to the rich reservoir of content thoughtfully submitted by GLR coalitions. Our aspiration is to add value by making the lessons learned from communities involved in this work more accessible to and usable by others across the country.
- The Briefs are part of an overall strategy of the GLR Support Center to play an active role in lowering the geographic barriers to learning and reduce the high costs of duplicative trial-and-error that currently exist within the network.
- The Briefs contain a range of on-the-ground, illustrative examples of strategies, practices and programs that have been implemented in all types and sizes of communities across the network. CGLR values both what can be learned from empirical research evidence as well as the wisdom derived from lived experience. The Briefs tilt more toward the latter.
- Rather than serving as an exhaustive, how-to guide on implementation, the Briefs should be used to prompt further exploration and inquiry. We anticipate that the content will be used to instigate a series of Roundtable Conversations and Communities of Practice in the months ahead as we delve deeply into the What's Working question and encourage more ongoing rigorous analyses of what we've done, what we've accomplished, and what we've learned as a network.
- We intentionally include a "draft" stamp on all of the Briefs to signal our commitment to continue to refine and strengthen these publications over time.