



Grade-Level Proficiency: Insights From GLR Communities

DRAFT Prepared for Discussion and Development

PRACTICE BRIEF #6

THE PROBLEM

According to the [2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), only 21% of fourth-graders who are eligible for free/reduced-price school lunches score at or above the proficient level in reading. With only a few notable exceptions, state-level performance on reading as well as math has flatlined over the past decade.

Since its inception, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has been focused on three “essential assurances” for more children of low-income families to reach the crucial milestones for early school success and proficiency by third grade. Those assurance include: 1) quality teaching for every child in every setting every day; 2) more seamless systems of care, services, and family supports for children ages 0–8; and 3) community solutions to the barriers faced by children least likely to succeed.

The purpose of this brief is to lift up examples of communities across the country where all three of those assurances are beginning to become more aligned, and where communities are reporting emerging evidence of measurable progress on grade-level proficiency.

In Dallas, Texas, district third-grade proficiency scores have moved from 28% to 40% between 2015 and 2019.

+12%

46%

In Arizona, over 1,000 K–3 teachers trained in the state’s new professional development program. Third-grade ELA assessment scores have increased from 40% in 2015 to 46% in 2019.



SOLUTIONS: WHAT'S WORKING IN GLR COMMUNITIES

This practice brief includes analysis of 73 stories filed by 38 communities in 20 states and two Canadian provinces that focus specifically on what GLR Campaign communities are doing to move the needle on grade-level proficiency. Based on that content, we identified six broad strategies as important ingredients or success factors in efforts by local GLR Campaigns:

- 1** **Improving the quality of instruction** by implementing the science of reading and what we know about early language and literacy development in classrooms with ongoing coaching and support.
- 2** **Supporting parent success** through strategies such as dyad reading, active reading and other approaches that assist parents in reading to and with their children at home.
- 3** **Creating more seamless systems of care** and aligning the early years and early grades around common targets, shared data systems and joint professional development.
- 4** **Providing targeted, consistent, evidence-based tutoring support** in specific skill areas for struggling readers.
- 5** **Removing health barriers** to grade-level proficiency (e.g., vision, hearing, etc.) and taking a comprehensive approach to supporting the social and emotional development of children.
- 6** **Mobilizing an entire community** to generate solutions, prioritize grade-level proficiency and identify and equip leaders who can serve as reading champions and mentors.

73 STORIES FILED BY 38 COMMUNITIES IN 20 STATES AND TWO CANADIAN PROVINCES THAT FOCUS SPECIFICALLY ON WHAT GLR CAMPAIGN COMMUNITIES ARE DOING TO MOVE THE NEEDLE ON GRADE-LEVEL PROFICIENCY.

Strategy 1: Improving the quality of instruction by implementing the science of reading and what we know about early language and literacy development in classrooms with ongoing coaching and support. GLR communities are working with schools and reading experts to train teachers and provide important information about what works for proficient early grade reading. Below are a few illustrations.

- The Arizona Department of Education expanded professional development to help improve reading instruction. The Teaching Reading Effectively (TRE) PD with a train-the-trainer model has been in high demand with over 1,000 K–3 teachers trained in the state since the roll-out. TRE-PD is based on the science of reading and builds educator knowledge around early literacy development as well as the right dosage and intensity. Third-grade ELA assessment scores have increased from 40% in 2015 to 46% in 2019. Learn more [here](#).
- The coalition in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, wanted to provide a resource to early grade teachers who were interested in learning more about the science of reading and explicit instruction. In partnership with Penn State Lehigh Valley, Lehigh Reads, developed micro-credentials — four badges that are each equivalent to three credits toward a master’s degree. Learn more [here](#).
- In Westchester and Putnam Counties, New York, the Elmsford School District and the United Way of Westchester and Putnam Counties partnered to use the A2i (assessments to instruction) Professional Support System in the classroom. Teachers used this research-validated system in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms to identify student needs and provide specific strategies for the students. In 2019, 67% of students reached or exceeded the benchmark in English Language Arts compared to 38% in 2018. Learn more [here](#) and [here](#).

PHOENIX, AZ

the Peralta Growing Readers initiative, which started with 30 families, has expanded to 400 families throughout the Cartwright Elementary School District.

Strategy 2: Supporting parent success through strategies such as dyad reading, active reading and other approaches that assist parents in reading to and with their children at home. GLR communities have designed many creative and effective ways to support and encourage parents to read at home with their children — through training in how to keep children engaged with books to ensuring that homes are literacy rich with ample books for families to enjoy together. Below are a few illustrations.

- Looking for interventions to address deep disparity in their six-district region, the Salt Lake, Utah, coalition began to promote dyad reading, training 323 teachers and 458 parents. Initially started by the work of a parent in a summer program at her school, this intervention has helped lead to an increase of six percentage points in the third-grade proficiency on the RISE end-of-year test from 2014 to 2019. Learn more [here](#).
- New York City’s comprehensive strategy has resulted in growth in third-grade reading proficiency rates at their five partnership schools from 9% in 2013 to 48% in 2019. ReadNYC uses a two-generation approach with parent empowerment at the heart of its work. In addition to working with many parents on financial, educational and/or career goals through a case-management approach, parent literacy engagement levels doubled year over year. 70% of all families engaged in weekly workshops designed to guide parents through effective reading habits that could be applied to any home reading time. Learn more [here](#).
- In Phoenix, Arizona, the Peralta Growing Readers initiative, which started with 30 families, has expanded to 400 families throughout the Cartwright Elementary School District. Families received four books each week for 25 weeks as well as parent support in developing habits, attitudes and social-emotional connections important for lifelong learning. The project found a 25% increase in children reading independently and a 50% increase in the number of days children and parents read together. Learn more [here](#).

Strategy 3: Creating more seamless systems of care and aligning the early years and early grades around common targets, shared data systems and joint professional development. GLR communities work to provide families and children a continuum of services and supports, particularly during the critical transition from pre-K or early child care to kindergarten. Below are a few illustrations.

- Dallas, Texas, has taken a systemwide approach to grade-level proficiency, acknowledging that action needs to be taken starting in the earliest years. They've worked to set up a data infrastructure to guide decisions across the early years and the early grades. Increasing pre-K enrollment (including pre-K for 3-year olds) and focusing on quality from pre-K through 2nd grade with an instructional coaching program have helped to create a seamless system of support. Third-grade reading proficiency scores have moved from 28% to 40% from 2015 to 2019. Learn more [here](#).
- Tupelo/Lee County, Mississippi, found that their two school districts, seven Head Start centers and 55 child care centers were not well-connected. The coalition set up tours for child care and Head Start teachers to observe in kindergarten classrooms and the school district provided some professional development for center teachers. After three years of partnership, Kindergarten Readiness Assessment-MKAS scores in the participating centers increased 14 points in one district and seven points in the other. Learn more [here](#).
- In Nash and Edgecombe Counties, North Carolina, the Down East Partnership for Children has a laser-like focus on school transition. Components of their work include providing technical assistance to schools and child care centers to develop and implement transition plans, coordinating school-based activities to increase kindergarten registration and connection with families, and outreach and communication about kindergarten registration, school readiness and transition activities. Learn more [here](#).

TUPELO/LEE COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI: AFTER THREE YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP, KINDERGARTEN READINESS ASSESSMENT-MKAS SCORES IN PARTICIPATING CENTERS INCREASED 14 POINTS IN ONE DISTRICT AND SEVEN POINTS IN THE OTHER.

Strategy 4: Providing targeted, consistent, evidence-based tutoring support

in specific skill areas for struggling readers. GLR communities are augmenting and supporting the work of schools both in and out of school buildings and the school day to ensure that the children struggling the most with reaching grade-level proficiency are receiving intensive tutoring and mentoring from a well-trained adult. Below are a few illustrations.

- Recognizing the correlation between fluency and performance on the third-grade reading assessments, Read Charlotte, in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, worked with the school district and the Helps Education Fund to train volunteers and implement the HELPS fluency tutoring program, which the district approved as Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. In 2019–2020, 55% of students exceeded expected growth in reading fluency at mid-year. Learn more [here](#).
- In Virginia Beach, Virginia, Virginia Beach City Public Schools, the Office of Volunteer Resources and GrowSmart developed the First Grade Reads program. Volunteer tutors for the program receive extensive training in effective instructional methods and techniques for increasing student engagement. At the end of the 2018–2019 school year, 78% of program participants had met their end-of-year literacy benchmark. Learn more [here](#).
- The Delray Beach, Florida, Grade-Level Reading Campaign works with Roots and Wings, a partner implementing an after-school tutoring program for students who are not reading at grade level. Certified teachers supervised by literacy coaches work with students for 1.5 hours three times a week. Results have been so positive that the program is expanding to eight additional schools with other pilot programs planned. Learn more [here](#).

DELRAY BEACH, FL

Certified teachers supervised by literacy coaches work with students
for 1.5 hours three times a week.

Strategy 5: Removing health barriers to grade-level proficiency (e.g., vision, hearing, etc.) and taking a comprehensive approach to supporting the social and emotional development of children. GLR communities are partnering with health professionals to ensure that young people receive the screenings they need to be effective learners. They are also ensuring that partners are trained in important social-emotional and trauma-informed practices. Below are a few illustrations.

- The Suncoast region of Florida is seeing the results from bringing a mental health professional into a school. This person collaborated with other social workers, the psychologist and school staff to ensure that students were being supported. As a result, teachers felt better equipped to address students' needs and reported that behavior improved and students spent more time on task. The program has grown to 14 schools. Learn more [here](#).
- In Des Moines, Iowa, Read to Succeed and Vision To Learn have partnered to provide vision screening in 40 schools in three school districts for over 26,000 students. In addition, over 3,000 students have received glasses. Vision To Learn has also made great strides in streamlining processes and reducing barriers, which has led to much of the growth in the number of students screened. Learn more [here](#).
- The Every Child Thrives coalition in Dodge & Jefferson Counties, Wisconsin, identified toxic stress as a result of adverse childhood experiences as a critical stumbling block in the goal of school readiness and grade-level proficiency. Nine partners participated in a national Trauma Informed, Resilience-Oriented Learning Community and then worked with others in the community to raise awareness about the science of trauma and the importance of trauma-informed practices. Learn more [here](#).

Strategy 6: Mobilizing an entire community to generate solutions, prioritize grade-level proficiency and identify and equip leaders who can serve as reading champions and mentors. GLR Campaign communities understand the importance and power of mobilizing around a clear grade-level reading proficiency goal and keeping partners focused and energized on this imperative as they all work to support children and families. Below are a few illustrations.

- From 2015–2019, the number of Broward County, Florida, third-graders who met or exceeded grade-level performance on the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) has increased from 52% in 2015 to 60%

in 2019. The Broward County coalition, Broward Reads, attributes its success with moving the needle on grade-level proficiency to a community-wide commitment to improving expansion of both access and participation in high-quality literacy programs. Learn more [here](#).

- In Indianola, Mississippi, the Sunflower Consolidated School District partnered with the Delta Health Alliance “aligning and galvanizing the community’s services, partnerships, and people around one result.” The coalition held population-level meetings to come to a consensus around the importance of kindergarten readiness and grade-level reading. Kindergarten readiness scores went from 25% in 2013 to 64% in 2017. In 2019, the student first-attempt pass rate on the third-grade state assessment at Lockard Elementary School was 82%, higher than the state average of 75% and the 62% average for other Delta counties. Learn more [here](#).
- In Georgia, the Whitfield/Dalton’s Birth to Eight Leadership Team, comprised of a wide range of community stakeholders, is committed to improving reading scores. They offered professional development classes for teachers, reached out to families to provide after school “Learning Academies” and provided books and learning activities at summer feeding sites. Dalton State College’s School of Education had teacher candidates develop Literacy Camps for elementary school children and their families during the summer. The teamwork to implement these initiatives and others has paid off. The percentage of third-graders meeting ELA milestones in Whitfield County moved from 28% proficient in 2015 to 43% in 2019, and in Dalton Public Schools, the percentage went from 24% in 2015 to 32% in 2019. Learn more [here](#).
- In Northfield, Minnesota, the community mobilized around the Move 5 Kids Initiative, which took an ambitious goal around grade-level proficiency and broke it down into achievable chunks. Empowering teachers with funding, additional supports and volunteers and using data-driven decisions were key strategies. Focused efforts reversed a five-year decline in third-grade reading proficiency, with a six percentage point increase in one year. Learn more [here](#).

Read more stories and promising practices about Improving Instruction and Strengthening pre-K to K–12 (Early Years to Early Grades) Transitions in the Deploying Innovative Strategies and Tools Channel on CLIP [here](#).

NORTHFIELD, MN

Focused efforts reversed a five-year decline in third-grade level proficiency, with a six percentage point increase in one year.

TAKEAWAYS

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

- 1** The power of the three assurances together with support to families is needed to see progress at scale. To learn more about ways GLR Campaign communities are addressing the third assurance, community solutions, [click here](#).
- 2** With the exception of Washington, D.C., and the state of Mississippi, the most recent NAEP scores on third-grade reading proficiency have been flat at best. More attention to the first two assurances at both the community and state level appears to be a critical path to progress with grade-level proficiency.
- 3** GLR Campaign communities are finding innovative ways to encourage and support school district partners to focus on quality teaching.
- 4** For students who are struggling with reading proficiency, additional time reading with trained volunteers and additional school or after-school and summer staff, using evidence-based programs, is a critical piece of moving toward reading success.
- 5** Progress toward third-grade reading proficiency takes a concerted effort among community partners. Communities making progress acknowledge that working across sectors in a united and aligned way helps them reach their goals.

GLR CAMPAIGN COMMUNITIES ARE FINDING INNOVATIVE WAYS TO ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTNERS TO FOCUS ON QUALITY TEACHING.

REVERSE THE POTENTIALLY CATASTROPHIC LEARNING LOSS BEING EXPERIENCED BY A LARGE PROPORTION OF STUDENTS WHO WILL NOT DERIVE THE FULL BENEFITS OF REMOTE LEARNING.

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 so many 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?

As we continue to better understand the implications of COVID-19 for children and families as well as learn and try new strategies to address the learning loss challenge our communities all face, where can we best put our focus? Now is the time 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 students who will not derive the full benefits of remote 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.