



BRIGHT SPOTS

ARKANSAS

The Arkansas Grade-Level Reading Campaign's work to reduce the number of young students who repeatedly miss school and to increase reading proficiency is a statewide effort involving prominent state players — for good reason.

“The ultimate goal is to impact statewide policy, practice and thinking,” explains Angela Duran, the coordinator of the Arkansas campaign, which is statewide but includes five “community solutions initiative sites.”

Begun in 2013, Arkansas's *Make Every Day Count* initiative to reduce chronic absence — students missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason — involves some of the Arkansas campaign's more than 30 partners, including Arkansas's education department, superintendents association, school boards association, public television station, a major foundation and a child advocacy group.

Seven school districts will pilot their own attendance effort and work together to develop a “model policy.” Three districts are in Arkansas campaign community sites — Pulaski County Special School District, outside Little Rock (suburban-rural central Arkansas); Springdale (blue-collar, mid-sized northwest Arkansas); and Marvell-Elaine (rural, small-town eastern Arkansas).

Make Every Day Count will focus on parent engagement, data collection and policy during the 2014–2015 school year. August marks Arkansas's early start (to coincide with the start of its school year) of Attendance Awareness Month, the September event co-sponsored by Attendance Works, a national initiative addressing chronic absence and a GLR Campaign partner working directly with Arkansas.

Radio spots by three well-known Arkansans — a former boxing champ, a former professional women's league basketball player and a comic book illustrator — will run on stations, from hip hop to country, to attract a variety of young parents. Banners, billboards and posters developed by the Arkansas campaign will be made available to districts.

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Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

Data on Arkansas's 53,000 K–3rd grade students in 2012, provided with help from the Arkansas Department of Education, show that:

- Chronic absence affects more than one out of 10 kindergartners and first graders.
- Nearly half of kindergartners are chronically absent or at risk of becoming chronically absent.
- Chronic absence is 2.5 times higher among students from the lowest-income families.
- Chronic absence is three times higher among young students scoring below basic vs. advanced on Arkansas's reading assessment.
- Nearly 80 percent of chronically absent students are in the lowest-income group and more than half score basic or below.

Make Every Day Count's initial engagement effort included public service announcements on the Arkansas Educational Television Network, the statewide PBS station. Then came work to gather attendance data. "We were able to break it down for the bigger school districts by grade, race, meal status. For many, it was truly eye-opening," says Duran.

Next up: analyzing the data and creating effective policy to pilot and share statewide. Arkansas's ability to work at the state level on chronic absence — as well as other GLR areas including parent engagement, school readiness and summer learning loss — is aided by its campaign's unusual statewide nature and abundant resources.

The Arkansas campaign has a coordinator, community site capacity grants, technical support and additional resources from the nonprofit Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, thanks to the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, based in Little Rock, which has long worked to move Arkansas from being ranked among the nation's lowest performing states in education. "There can be coordination across districts that wouldn't happen on its own," says Duran.

The hope is not only that the seven districts will implement new policy, expanding "on what's already there to more intensively address chronic absence," says Duran. If the model policy wins support from the Arkansas School Boards Association, it is more likely to spread. "It will take time but when people start having success with it and people hear about it, everyone will want to do it," says Duran.

For more information, contact Angela Duran at 870-692-3176 or aduran@ar-glr.net.