



INNOVATION BRIEF

The Campaign for
GRADE-LEVEL
READING

Reaching & Supporting
Parents Where
They Are >

Common sense and research confirm the critical role that parents play in their young child's learning — as their first teacher, most important advocate and powerful coach. With this in mind, Campaign for Grade-Level Reading communities nationwide are engaging, supporting and equipping parents — in the places parents frequent — with books and early literacy messages.

Every parent wants to be successful in preparing their children for school and life.

In laundromats, barber shops, bus stations, grocery stores, restaurants and playgrounds, parents are being encouraged to read, talk and interact with their young children in order to develop the language skills that increase a child’s ability to read proficiently by the end of third grade, a key steppingstone to later success.

“If we want more children to succeed, we must think differently about what we do to help parents succeed,” says Yolie Flores, who oversees the Campaign’s [Successful Parents Initiatives](#).

“Every parent wants to be successful in preparing their children for school and life. Many, however, don’t have the information, tools or supports they need. Some of the biggest barriers, particularly for low-income families, are time, access and transportation. So what can we do differently? Go to where parents are!”

Going where parents — and other family or guardians caring for a young child — are has inspired clever engagement strategies by GLR communities, including:

- Stocking [Habitat](#) for Humanity homes with starter family libraries in [Alabama](#).
- Installing [Little Free Libraries](#) in low-income neighborhoods in [Ames](#), Iowa.

- Offering free books to families riding city buses in [Roanoke](#), Virginia.
- Creating a lending library at a rural health center in [Wallowa County](#), Oregon.
- Helping businesses promote early literacy with customers in [Pittsfield](#), Massachusetts.
- Putting messages in grocery carts suggesting early literacy activities to do while shopping in the U.S. [Virgin Islands](#).
- Coaching parents visiting WIC program offices on how to stimulate early literacy in [Los Angeles](#) and how to provide “language nutrition” in [Georgia](#).
- Extending library outreach into parks, summer meals sites and public housing in [Seattle](#).
- Encouraging public housing residents to develop early literacy in [Topeka](#), Kansas, and [Springfield](#), Massachusetts.

Support comes from public and private sources, as well as fundraisers. Staffing ranges from volunteers to paid employees. Organizers include local and state GLR Campaigns, literacy councils, nonprofits, libraries, foundations and corporations.

[JetBlue](#) Airways, for example, launched a pilot program in 2015 that fills vending machines at a Salvation Army shop, grocery store and church with free books for children in Washington, D.C. It targets “book deserts” — neighborhoods where families cannot afford the kind of home library that makes books a constant presence and reading an everyday, lifelong activity.



Too Small to Fail, an early childhood initiative of the Clinton Foundation and Next Generation, a San Francisco nonprofit, launched the *Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing* campaign in Oakland, California, and Tulsa in 2014. It relays messages to low-income parents via its infant/toddler clothing line, distributed free of charge at hospitals, clinics and child care programs; and via billboards, bus shelter ads and posters in neighborhoods. Other cities use the campaign's [guide](#).

In summer 2015, a *Talking is Teaching*-themed playground opened in a Los Angeles neighborhood — the first of 20 new [playgrounds](#) across the country to include conversation prompts encouraging fun, language-rich, parent-child interactions.

Partners in this effort, [Shane's Inspiration](#), a California foundation, and [Landscape Structures](#), a Minnesota company, also will develop messaging for existing playgrounds in low-income communities, teaming up with parks and recreation departments, early childhood centers, civic groups and other community organizations nationwide.

Other efforts happening across the country are part of national campaigns such as:

- [Reach Out and Read](#), which helps pediatricians distribute books to parents and caregivers during well-child visits via a nonprofit founded by two pediatric physicians and an early childhood educator.
- [Born Learning](#), a United Way Worldwide initiative that includes helping communities build early literacy trails in parks, malls, grocery stores and other public places.

Here is a look at how three GLR Campaign communities reach out to, support, and equip parents where they are.



dayton ohio

At the Bus Station

For children riding the city bus in Dayton, Ohio, summer offers an added attraction — free books they select from shelves set up in five transit centers.

“The goal is to get books in the hands of children and families. Children, especially in urban areas, don’t have access to enough high-quality books,” says Ritika Kurup, assistant director of Learn to Earn Dayton/*ReadySetSoar*, a Dayton-area partnership that leads the community’s GLR campaign. “With books available at the bus stations, families can read with their children while they’re waiting for their ride or pick up books to take home.”

Almost 18,000 children’s books were distributed during 11 weeks in summer 2015, up from 5,000 during a five-week effort the previous summer. The transit centers also distributed information about the public library’s summer reading program and maps locating the main library’s 21 branches on bus routes. Several centers offered story times.

“Our basic message is that the bus can take you where you need to go, but reading can take you wherever you want to go in life,” says Tracey Hanlin Rohr of the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority (RTA), which partners with *ReadySetSoar* and Dayton Metro Library to offer what’s known as Read On RTA.

“There’s a need. When I’m stocking bookshelves, children are in a circle around me waiting to pick out a book. Do not underestimate the need — it is astounding. We were quite surprised.”

Read On RTA came to be after the community’s *Read On!* campaign sought help with its annual spring book drive from the transit authority. The drive, involving many partners, helps *ReadySetSoar* provide 10 books during 10 summer weeks for prekindergarten through third-grade students at selected elementary schools where children may not have books at home.

“When we approached RTA, they said, ‘How about if we have our own shelves?’ which was fantastic and even better because that’s exactly where families are,” says Kurup. “It really was their staff’s idea. Our coalition started the book distribution and they took it to the next level.”

The Read On RTA books come from culling the library’s collection, as well as from the nonprofit distributor, *First Book Marketplace*; the Dayton nonprofit *Project READ*; an RTA employees’ book drive; and purchases using a *ReadySetSoar* community grant. Library volunteers help cull, pack and haul the books. RTA employees help make sure the bookshelves remain stocked. A library employee is assigned to each transit center.



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“Everyone pitches in. The more people you can bring to the table to help plan, the better,” says Diane Farrell of Dayton Metro Library. “While our mission is very different from our transit authority, our audiences are very similar so it’s logical for libraries to partner with their transit system.”

Book giveaways and story times also were provided during summer 2015 through another RTA effort — a refurbished bus with seats replaced by computers

and furniture, which parked at summer meal sites and public housing complexes, complementing the library’s book mobile, which visits summer camps and child care centers.

Regardless of the vehicle, the goal is the same. “Books are given out and they’re ending up in the homes of families who will love them and use them,” says Farrell.



richmond california

At the Laundromat

Inside a Richmond, California, laundromat, families with young children pass the time browsing through a bookshelf and picking out books to read and take home.

“We target kids from baby to third grade,” says Robin Wilson of West County Reads, a community collaborative working to increase early literacy in western Contra Costa County, including the Bay Area [GLR community](#) of Richmond.

“Kids today don’t think of recreational reading as fun. But with our bookshelves, they can select what they are interested in, so they will read. That’s what we’re trying to foster and it’s working.”

West County Reads collects and distributes about 10,000 books a year at community events and via *Take It, Leave It Bookshelf*, which places books in locations frequented by low-income families. “The books tend to fly off the shelves, especially at the laundromat. The kids can’t wait,” says Wilson, a retired school librarian.

In summer 2015, bookshelves were located in seven places including the laundromat, community centers, YMCAs, a church and a nonprofit serving families. Next up — a preschool. “With preschool budgets being slashed,” the need is growing, says Wilson. “We tailor each bookshelf to the needs of the site.”

At laundromats in the nearby GLR community of Oakland, a free bilingual children’s book will be distributed on October 22 to mark the kickoff of [Jumpstart’s](#) annual *Read for the Record*[®] — an effort connected to a new nationwide *Wash Time is Talk Time* promotion in laundromats from Too Small to Fail, in collaboration with the Coin Laundry Association.

The Oakland laundromats are among 5,000 in disadvantaged communities nationwide that will receive a free *Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing* toolkit to distribute to families, encouraging them to interact with their young children and to boost early brain and language development.

In Oakland, volunteers from First 5 [Alameda County](#) and elsewhere will host free laundry days, lead monthly story times and engage parents. A similar effort in northwest Arkansas laundromats will be led by the University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions.

In Richmond, *Take It, Leave It Bookshelf* started in 2005 in 14 elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods. Next came bookshelves in community centers, youth organizations and a church. In 2010, the laundromat idea took off — and has since fluctuated between one and two sites.

“We’ve had many partners and books donated from all over the place,” says Wilson. “There’s no overhead, no stress and people know how to contact us to replenish the shelves.”

Children are encouraged to return books but it is not required. Donations have come from book drives held by West County Reads and the Richmond Rotary Club as well as from a private middle school, public schools and public library after they culled their collections. Cash donations are used to buy multi-cultural and bilingual books from First Book Marketplace.

A [Richmond Community Foundation](#) grant was used to buy new bookcases. County-funded agencies donated surplus bookcases. A local mall donated storage space for the books. Retired school literacy specialists volunteer to sort and level books by grade.

“You need dedicated volunteers who believe in the project and are willing to donate their time,” says Wilson. “We’re all volunteers and yet we’ve been doing this for a long time. The interest just grows. We want to get more books in the community.”



West County Reads
collects and distributes
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KFCFS
FRESH CUT FRESH START
KNOWLEDGE

A Little One, A Big Bed
Tina Macneil

kansas city missouri

At the Barbershop

Dads often read to their young children while waiting for a haircut at Joey Thomas's barbershop in Kansas City, Missouri.

"I chose to do it because it makes sense — literacy is an issue," says Thomas, explaining why his barbershop is among 12 in urban Kansas City that, in spring 2015, started distributing free children's books.

The effort also encourages fathers "to bond with their kids, read a book and take a little time," says Thomas, who has two daughters, a 4-year-old and an infant. "Doing it inside a barber shop was a great idea."

Staff at [Turn the Page KC](#), the Kansas City grade-level reading coalition, were looking for ways to better engage fathers of young children in their early literacy program when Kansas City Mayor Sly James's education advisor suggested that "we should meet dads in places they frequent, like barbershops," says Mike English, Turn the Page KC executive director.

"We realized we could create small bookshelves full of books and offer them up to barbers for free to keep in their shop, with the request that they talk to their customers about the importance of talking and reading to their kids at a very early age."

Organizers selected barbershops in targeted urban neighborhoods. "We explained what we were doing and they were all enthusiastic," says English. The campaign also provides posters highlighting early literacy. Fathers are encouraged to post photos and stories on social media about reading with their kids (hashtag #DadsTurnThePage), which also gets them entered in a contest for prizes including free Kansas City Royals tickets.

"Most of the pictures we see are mothers reading with their kids," says Mayor James in a promotional [video](#), while strolling through Thomas's barbershop. "Even when we do see fathers, we don't see many African-American fathers or Latino fathers. We want to emphasize that... They read to their kids as well."

Geared for children up to age 9, the books are donated by the Kansas City Public Library and First Book Marketplace. Southwest Airlines, a Turn the Page KC partner, gave free airline tickets to Joey Thomas, to acknowledge his efforts.

Kansas City also has been inspired by [Barbershop Books™](#), a nonprofit program that has created child-friendly reading corners targeting young African-American boys in six New York City barbershops and aims to expand in the city and beyond. The books are supposed to remain at



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the barbershop, which may be a more sustainable model for Kansas City, adds English. By mid-July, 600 of 2,000 books available in Kansas City barbershops were gone.

Other partners include the Local Investment Commission, a before- and after-school program provider, and The Family Conservancy (TFC). TFC is a Kansas City nonprofit with an early literacy campaign, *Talk, Read,*

Play, that works to close “the 30 Million Word Gap”—the wide gap, research shows, in the number of words heard by children from low-income families by age 3, compared with their more affluent peers.

“We’re also giving the father of a young child the *Talk, Read, Play* talking points,” says English. “Getting dads to talk and read to their kids from an early age ultimately will help with third-grade reading.”

For more information about the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, visit gradelevelreading.net. Follow us on Twitter @readingby3rd.