



INNOVATION BRIEF

The Campaign for
GRADE-LEVEL
READING

Self-Assessment >

Increasing the number of U.S. children, especially children from low-income families, who read proficiently by the end of third grade will take plenty of well-considered work over time.

Seventy-seven GLR communities completed the self-assessment by the spring of 2015.

Mindful of this, communities across the country doing the work on-the-ground as members of the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading \(GLR\)](#) recently took stock of their efforts, using a new tool — the *GLR Community Self-Assessment*. “For the past year, we’ve heard a consistent message from communities about the value of taking a step back from day-to-day implementation in order to reassess what’s working and what’s not so they can move forward even faster and better,” says Ron Fairchild, who oversees the Campaign’s technical assistance arm, the [Network Communities Support Center \(NCSC\)](#), which co-developed the self-assessment with GLR communities.

Seventy-seven GLR communities completed the self-assessment by the spring of 2015, answering questions designed to help them evaluate their progress on strategies detailed in their action plan and, if need be, revise the plan. Communities also gained information to use when applying, by the end of 2016, for the 2017 [All-America City Awards](#), which recognize early literacy progress.

“Communities reported that the self-assessment tool turned out to be a helpful resource,” says Fairchild. “One of the things we hear regularly is that the self-assessment process enabled communities to re-engage their local

sponsoring coalition in order to build broader buy-in from partners, get a clearer idea of where they are and what to do next, and find more compelling ways to tell their story.”

For the NCSC, responses to the self-assessments shed light on additional technical assistance to offer to the Campaign’s [burgeoning Network](#), which has grown to include 167 communities in 41 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands — and counting.

The responses also provided valuable information about where progress is happening and helped identify 30 communities honored by the Campaign as [2014 Pace-setters](#) for work to make measurable improvement in student outcomes on school readiness, school attendance, summer learning and grade-level reading.

“It’s very helpful to have both an in-depth understanding of what’s happening in specific communities and a bird’s eye view across the Network,” says Fairchild. “We’re starting to see real movement and momentum in communities and across states. Aggregating the information within states also helps communities speak with one voice and better appeal to investors and policymakers.”

Self-assessments from communities show that:

- 91 percent are addressing the Campaign’s three focus areas — increasing school readiness, reducing chronic absenteeism and improving summer learning — and using proven and promising programs.
- 100 percent are working to engage parents, identified by the Campaign as critical to the success of efforts to make progress on the three focus areas.



- 96 percent are working to address the important connections between health and learning, known as “the health determinants of early school success,” also critical to the success of school readiness, chronic absenteeism and summer learning efforts.
- 80 percent are using disaggregated data to establish baselines, set targets, track progress and ensure accountability.
- 93 percent are building a coalition of local funders to support their campaign and 47 percent are using an updated Community Solutions Action Plan (CSAP).

The Campaign is gathering feedback and revising the self-assessment tool for release later in 2015. The NCSC will again use the completed self-assessments to identify 2015 Pacesetters. Here is a look at the self-assessment experiences of three communities that were among the first to join the Campaign in 2012 and among the 2014 Pacesetters.

.....



© Randall Gee, University of the Pacific

dubuque

Iowa

Strengthening early childhood programs, in the wake of self-assessment

The eastern Iowa city of Dubuque is working with new energy and funding to improve the quality of early childhood programs that help prepare children for school, thanks to insights gleaned from its self-assessment.

“It’s happening,” says Eric Dregne, vice president of the [Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque](#), the GLR community lead organization. “We ended up identifying a gap in support and gained increased commitment from some partners. They sorted it out and took action.”

After revisiting the many to-do items in their [CSAP](#) while filling out the self-assessment, coalition partners realized that one school readiness goal — to encourage more local child care and preschool programs to participate in [Iowa’s voluntary quality rating system](#) — never got far. “We just didn’t get to it,” says Dregne.

In response, Dubuque secured funding plus buy-in from several partners to help 11 child care centers and preschools join the system and work toward top quality ratings by summer 2015. Partners include the school district, the county child care resource and referral agency and the local Visiting Nurse Association.

While the self-assessment pinpointed areas in need of strengthening, it also identified strengths including Dubuque’s growing GLR coalition of local partners; the expansion of summer learning programs for at-risk children; and a pilot attendance program that produced a 71 percent drop in chronic absenteeism at one elementary school during the 2013–2014 school year, spurring replication efforts.

“It was really useful to engage our partners in looking at where we’re at,” says Dregne. “It’s easy to get into this kind of work, go along, do good things and never pause to see what’s really happening in relation to the plan from a few years ago.”

The process also galvanized partners, including the community foundation, a key funder. “You can see what people are doing. This matters,” says Dregne. “As a funder, we want to know our partners are committed to a plan with clear objectives.”

And discussion prompted by the self-assessment inspired the Dubuque coalition to add items to its to-do list including rethinking the data it collects to measure results, updating its CSAP and adding work in relatively new areas such as health.



The coalition is now doing more to keep all partners up to speed and on the same page. During the self-assessment discussion, “some people said, ‘I didn’t know we were doing that!’ or ‘Why are we doing that?’” says Dregne. This suggested the need to consistently “show people that they are working according to plan, that it’s not just ‘stuff happening.’ We didn’t do that enough.”

The self-assessment also provided Dubuque with lessons learned to share with two Iowa communities that recently joined the Campaign. “It’s a really great head start for them,” says Dregne. “They can look at all that we’ve learned in the last two years.”

Periodic self-assessment, adds Dregne, is vital to ensuring the long-term viability of Dubuque’s GLR campaign. “Especially when you’re trying to do something with multiple partners over a long period of time, cross sector, you can’t just plow along and not check in and not think about where you are, who’s engaged and who’s not,” he says. “If you don’t take stock, it falls apart as soon as everybody loses their initial enthusiasm.”

Periodic self-assessment is vital to ensuring the long-term viability of Dubuque’s GLR campaign.

stockton san joaquin county

California

Working to better engage parents, following lessons learned from self-assessment

A new parent engagement initiative to boost the early literacy and school readiness of young children has been launched in California's San Joaquin County, inspired by what was learned from the self-assessment.

"Through the process, we saw a substantial school readiness need. The county has never seen the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool even hit the 50 percent mark," says Jennifer Torres Siders, community relations director at University of the Pacific, [the local GLR campaign's](#) lead organization.

"It forced us to recognize some policy and funding issues that are out of our control and need to be resolved before all 3- and 4-year-olds get a preschool experience. In the meantime, to improve school readiness we need to focus on campaigns that engage parents, caregivers and older siblings in helping ensure that children get great early learning experiences."

Hence the March 2015 debut of San Joaquin Reads, an outreach campaign that has trained 40 people to host literacy-focused parent-child story times and uses tools from "Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing," an effort pioneered in Oakland, California, a GLR community.

The tools come from a new guide released by leaders of the Oakland effort.

The GLR Community Self-Assessment arrived at "a very good time," notes Torres Siders, because Stockton had started updating its strategic plan, a smaller version of its CSAP. "We were in that mode anyway because a lot has changed since the first plan — not our overarching goals, but we have refined what we were working toward and our coalition has more solid membership."

Using the tool was "a really valuable way to organize that conversation," she adds. The coalition's 50-some partners were invited to respond, informing a deeper conversation by a smaller steering group.

Strengths that emerged include the campaign's measurable progress in reducing chronic absence, which dropped from 30 percent to 25 percent for elementary-school age students in San Joaquin County in 60 schools between 2013 and 2014. The self-assessment process also spurred the "fast-tracking" of data-sharing between coalition partners to better identify and reduce the number of young children who are chronically absent from school.

Other strengths include the community's successful cross-sector coalition and its communications work, ranging from a periodic San Joaquin Literacy Report

Card to [Summer Learning Guides](#) that offer parents easy literacy-supporting activities to do at home, reading lists and a directory of free and low-cost enrichment activities.

“We are countywide so if you want to take any initiative to scale, it’s a little challenging. We focus on public relations and community awareness campaigns,” says Torres Siders. “What we learned through the self-assessment is that communication projects also strengthen our internal partnerships.”

When using a collective impact approach that unites several partners around shared goals, measures and results, one challenge is to involve partners, notes Torres Siders. “It’s tough to sustain engagement and build momentum when folks don’t feel like they’re part of something concrete and tangible,” she says. “The Summer Learning

Guides work was a very concrete project that serves a campaign need in a very collective way.”

Teachers provided content. Communications professionals provided graphics. Hispanic groups provided translation. The local newspaper printed and distributed the guides. “Diverse groups contributed in meaningful ways that were already organic to what they do,” says Torres Siders.

San Joaquin Reads offers a similar opportunity. And, Torres Siders adds, the initiative is an example of how “the self-assessment process gave us a clearer picture of our needs and strengths and how to match those in moving the work forward.”



80%

are using disaggregated data to establish baselines, set targets, track progress and ensure accountability

Self-Assessments from Communities Show That

96%

are working to address the important connections between health and learning

100%

are working to engage parents, identified by the Campaign as critical to the success of efforts



roanoke

Virginia

Pondering new efforts to boost school readiness, prompted by self-assessment

For Roanoke, Virginia's GLR campaign, the self-assessment sparked many ideas of possible future work including:

- Expanding a project that tracks the school readiness of children transitioning from early childhood programs to kindergarten.
- Encouraging more exchange between early childhood programs and schools, in order to improve both — and to ease children's transition.
- Doing more to involve parents and address children's health issues, especially nutrition.

"It's been really good for the campaign to take a deep breath, pull information together, celebrate successes and re-evaluate," says Sheila Umberger, director of the Roanoke Public Libraries, the lead organization for the community's GLR coalition.

Responding to self-assessment questions that required a written response, beyond data, also complemented Roanoke's ongoing use of the [Results Scorecard](#), an online platform used to collect data in order to track progress and guide work. Roanoke is among more than 80 GLR communities who are using the Results Scorecard.

"The self-assessment has a narrative that answers questions by telling stories. That's important. It helps us articulate how we got to the Scorecard results," says Umberger.

Strengths illuminated by the self-assessment include strong support from local foundations such as [Life Ring Foundation](#), which aided in the development of a Roanoke Baby board book. Three thousand books have been distributed with the help of Turn the Page Foundation and the [Roanoke Public Library Foundation](#).

The self-assessment also spotlighted school readiness progress for children attending some of Roanoke's "star-rated" early childhood programs, which participate in Virginia's voluntary quality star-rating program. In fall 2014, 91 percent of these children entered kindergarten with the skills needed to succeed, as measured by a readiness assessment, up from 88 percent the year before and compared with 79 percent for children not in this group.

This unusual documentation was made possible thanks to a project led by [Virginia Tech](#) researchers Craig and Sharon Ramey that is following specific children through third grade. To gather the necessary data — ranging from assessment scores to family make-up and risk variables — the project relies on rare data-sharing by early childhood providers and the school district. A new preschool assessment also is given.



© Roanoke Public Libraries

Funded by the Dorothy Koch Family Foundation, United Way and the Roanoke Public Library Foundation, the project has produced data confirming that quality matters. Tracked graduates of star-rated programs including Head Start performed, as a cohort, 14 points higher than the school district average on a 2014 school readiness assessment.

“We have always wanted to connect work done in preschool and the schools,” says Umberger. “We think if we provide best practices that are important to preschoolers that they’ll do better in school. Until we did the data analysis, we couldn’t prove it.”

By pinpointing areas where young children are struggling, the project also is providing information to help early childhood programs and schools strengthen their instruction and help individual students.

But, to date, the tracking is happening in only a fraction of Roanoke’s programs. “We need to expand this so every child has some kind of information coming with them into the school system,” says Amber Yopp, the libraries’ youth services manager.

“The self-assessment also made us realize we need to work to get more centers signed up to be quality centers and the impact this would make on not just our children being ready for school but reading at grade level by the end of third grade.”

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