



Collaboration Around Grade-Level Reading Making a Difference in Arkansas

In the first grade, Christazia Kye struggled in reading and her mother feared she would fall further and further behind. Two years later, the vivacious student at the Martin Luther King Elementary School in Little Rock adores books and is in striking distance of reading proficiently on grade level.

“She loves reading now,” says Latosha Kye, Christazia’s mother. “I always catch her trying to pronounce things she sees and reading out loud. Her reading teacher says she is almost on grade level, and I most definitely see a huge difference in her.”

Christazia’s transformation was made possible by a wide-ranging statewide effort spearheaded by a local foundation to ensure that by 2020, all children are reading on grade level by the end of the third grade.

In this high-poverty state that has historically lagged in educational achievement and rates of high school graduation, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) recognized that for many children, meeting this milestone could mean the difference between intergenerational poverty and lifelong success.

WRF launched the [Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading \(AR-GLR\)](#) in 2012 to support parents, schools and communities working collaboratively to foster a culture that supports reading and expands knowledge, practices and policies to improve reading proficiency. Like the national [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#), AR-GLR focuses on bolstering school readiness, school attendance and summer learning opportunities, but it also targets enhanced family and community engagement. This agenda dovetails with WRF’s “Moving the Needle” initiative, a strategic plan to curb poverty, boost school achievement, strengthen communities and build up Arkansas’s nonprofit support system.

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The foundation’s success in bringing diverse partners together to tackle third-grade reading offers valuable insights for other funders, particularly in a rural state where declining enrollment, school consolidation and the loss of agricultural jobs have eroded resources to support children, parents and teachers.

WRF has played a critical role in taking up the cause of early literacy, providing leadership and investing in research, communications, policy and advocacy to spur statewide public awareness and action. In addition, it has seeded innovation in five demonstration sites across the state, helping

communities to learn from one another and to draw on resources and lessons learned from the national GLR Campaign.

For Sherece West-Scantlebury, president and chief executive officer of WRF, it was an easy sell when Ralph Smith, managing director of the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, first shared his vision with her. She immediately recognized how critical a concerted effort to boost literacy was for a rural state like Arkansas.

“This work is tough, and we have a challenging environment in a rural state that has historically ranked among the five poorest states,” notes West-Scantlebury. “But it’s a moral and social imperative to overcome barriers to school achievement for the future of our economy and our citizens.”

Assembling the Team

WRF has made substantial strategic investments to support AR-GLR, while cultivating a skilled network of individuals and organizations to carry out its vision. For example:

- Angela Duran, tapped by WRF to serve as campaign director of AR-GLR in 2012, has played a lead role in recruiting, convening and setting the agenda for a broad-based advisory committee and developing research reports and strategic planning documents.
- The 30-member [Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Advisory Committee](#) is made up of state and local public, nonprofit and community organizations that guide the Campaign and whose individual work contributes to its collective impact.
- [Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families](#) (AACF) has received WRF support to manage the policy, advocacy and research components of AR-GLR. It has focused on ensuring adequate funding for the state-funded preschool program, advocating for more summer and after-school programs and ensuring that children with dyslexia and other reading challenges get the help they need.
- WRF has also begun partnering more closely with the [Arkansas Community Foundation](#), which is now providing support to help manage the campaign.
- [The Hatcher Group](#) provides communications support for AR-GLR, shaping messages and strategies to raise awareness about the pressing need for grade-level reading proficiency in Arkansas and build community engagement and public will.
- WRF funding also supports outreach to [publicize](#) AR-GLR through the Arkansas Educational Television Network (AETN), the state’s network of PBS stations, using public service announcements and other special programming.

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Sherece West-Scantlebury
President & Chief Executive Officer,
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

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- In 2013, AR-GLR launched the Make Every Day Count initiative in partnership with [Attendance Works](#), which promotes strategies to reduce chronic absence in the early grades; help schools, districts and communities track chronic absence; and develop and implement plans for keeping children in the classroom. The campaign is working with the state department of education to help seven school districts collect data to identify chronic absence trends and work with children and families to help address the issue.

In addition to television and radio PSAs, AR-GLR uses social media, e-blasts, blog posts and news stories to spread information about how various sectors can support third-grade reading in Arkansas. For example, the campaign has developed a set of [videos](#) chronicling how high-quality preschool benefits children, parents and the local economy.

Duran has also worked with the advisory committee to develop a strategic plan for 2015–2017 to present to state leaders. The plan provides in-depth data on student and school performance and details how specific agencies and entities can spur improvements in the four pillar areas of the AR-GLR campaign.

Collaborative Problem-Solving

A distinctive feature of the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Advisory Committee is the degree of collaboration, camaraderie and cooperation among members in forging strategies to meet AR-GLR’s objectives.

“From the very beginning, there was a long list of myriad people who touch the lives of children, families and educators who were eager to come together,” says Tonya Williams, director of the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education in the Arkansas Department of Human Services. “The advisory committee is one of those meetings that you really look forward to because of its cohesiveness and the way it lends itself to helping us connect and share ideas and resources to further our strategic goals.”

“They had me at hello,” says Geania Dickey, a former advisory committee member who was instrumental in a volunteer advocacy effort that led to a \$100 million funding increase in 2008 for Arkansas Better Chance (ABC), the state-funded preschool program. Dickey, now director of human capital at the Arkansas Department of Human Services, previously worked at Arkansas State University overseeing efforts to provide training, coaching and support for child care providers across the state and to implement the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System, which rates child care centers according to quality.

She helped the advisory committee explore ways to better serve the birth-to-3 population and boost their vocabulary development. The four focus areas of AR-GLR “just resonate with people and make so much sense, and the way they weave them together instead of looking at them in isolation helps

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bring everyone together for a common focus,” says Dickey. “A lot of us would move things around because we didn’t want to miss this meeting.”

“There is a lot of opportunity for the work one group is doing to support another group in a different way,” notes Jerri Derlikowski, the former director of education policy and finance for Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. Derlikowski now runs Community Resource Innovations, a consulting firm working to help rural communities and schools connect to resources to support learning, such as after-school programs and school-based health services.

Seeding Local Innovation

A significant share of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation’s investment in AR-GLR supports intensive partnerships to promote the campaign in five communities. Known as Community Solution Initiative (CSI) sites, they include Eudora, Little Rock, Marvell-Elaine, Pulaski County and Springdale.

WRF invited a pool of sites to apply for this funding based on factors such as geographic and ethnic diversity and overlap with other foundation initiatives. After evaluating the proposals and making site visits, the foundation selected the most competitive.

“We hope that the data from these five communities will be beneficial to our efforts to ensure children are reading on grade level by third grade in Arkansas and to the national campaign,” notes West-Scantlebury. “We want to be able to provide lessons and models for other communities in our state and for rural communities nationally.” The foundation has contracted with the University of Arkansas School of Social Work to conduct a community-driven assessment of these sites.

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Geania Dickey, former advisory committee member

The CSI sites serve as a learning community for each other, sharing strategies and challenges. “The five sites meet twice a year, and we bring in state and national early literacy experts and share resources from the national campaign with them,” notes AR-GLR Campaign Director Duran.

Site Highlights

The community partnership that bolstered Christazia Kye’s progress in **Little Rock** is called **MLK Reads**, which provides extra help for kindergarten to third-grade children who score below grade level in reading skills.

Chris Ellis, the Minister of Mission and Outreach at Second Baptist Church, says his church was searching for a social justice issue to commit to when he came across the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2010 report, “Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters,” the report that launched the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. “It was like a light bulb went off,” says Ellis, who recognized the connection between children’s failure to succeed in school when they can’t master reading and high school dropout rates, poverty and incarceration.

The WRF funding helped the church team up with the Martin Luther King Elementary School to recruit and train nearly 70 volunteers to offer twice-a-week tutoring sessions for K–3 students scoring below grade level in reading. The program also includes a summer program to help the children maintain gains in reading and prevent summer learning loss and also includes recreational activities and field trips as well as breakfast and lunch. “We also try to surround the families holistically with support,” notes Ellis, through such efforts as helping them buy school clothes and supplies.

“Having the sustained personal attention to work on reading fluency and comprehension helped give Christazia the confidence and focus she needed, and now she enjoys getting attention for being successful in school,” notes Ricki Bailey, a retired school administrator who helped tutor the girl in school and at camp.

Data from May 2014 showed that after just one year of MLK Reads, 40 percent of children in the program were reading on grade level; another 50 percent showed improvement; and 10 percent were identified with special needs requiring additional support.

Ellis notes that the church had put aside funding to help support this effort before it received the WRF grant, and that the grant process and recognition of MLK Reads have helped leverage other aid, such as a grant from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation.



In **Eudora**, residents came together to design Eudora Reads with support from the [Rural Community Alliance \(RCA\)](#), a statewide nonprofit that leads grassroots community revitalization efforts in rural Arkansas and helps its members become advocates for their rural schools and communities. Eudora Reads offers after-school and summer literacy programs. It also partners with a local pediatric clinic and with programs such as the Dolly Parton Imagination Library and Reach Out and Read to provide books and resources for parents of young children. And the program has engaged more than 200 parents and families, offering monthly parent gatherings and a quarterly “parent university.”

RCA, which has 1,800 members in 65 chapters in small rural communities throughout Arkansas, has helped spread the impact of these efforts well beyond Eudora. “We talk about grade-level reading in just about every email we send to members, and we promote it on our Facebook page and at our annual conferences,” notes Renee Carr, RCA’s former executive director and now chief financial officer.

The Alliance has also been able to leverage funds from other sources, such as the [Carl B. and Florence E. King Foundation](#), to provide matching grants in Eudora and nine other communities for early childhood literacy and parent engagement projects. Eudora Reads also has partnered with a summer nutrition program funded by USDA to provide literacy coaches, works with Reach Out and Read in an effort to provide books for children when they go to the doctor for well visits, and partners with the public library to provide reading activities for young children at the library and at preschools.

“We are trying to immerse children in literacy any way and anywhere we can,” notes Carr.

In the CSI site serving the Delta towns of **Marvell** and **Elaine**, the lead player is the Boys, Girls, Adult Community Development Center, Inc. Formed in 1978, BGACDC is a grassroots nonprofit that aims to empower and improve the quality of life for the area's poor, mainly African-American residents. In a partnership with the Marvell-Elaine Elementary School, BGACDC combines the [Children's Defense Fund's Freedom School](#) model with the school system's regular summer school program to offer a free six-week summer camp. The program focuses on reading and literacy activities while providing recreational and cultural activities, field trips and healthy breakfast, lunch and snacks. College interns, classroom teachers and community members all play a role.

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Sylvia Moore
Principal, Marvell-Elaine Elementary School

Marvell-Elaine Reads also has a literacy-rich pre-kindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-olds and provides high-quality professional development for its pre-K teachers. It also launched a pre-kindergarten summer school program in the summer of 2014 to help ease the transition for children starting school in the fall.

“Child care instructors are receiving a lot of high-quality professional development, and we’re creating a continuum so that we don’t have gaps between what child care providers and the early grades are teaching,” notes Sylvia Moore, the principal of the Marvell-Elaine elementary school.

[OneCommunity Reads](#), the CSI site based in **Springdale**, is a nonprofit formed specifically to bring this multi-ethnic community together around parent engagement in children’s learning. With a growing population of Latino residents as well as families from the Marshall Islands, Springdale has the largest number of English language learners in the state. Also known as UnaComunidad Lendando!, OneCommunity Reads serves 60 families at three elementary schools.

Using a program called Parents Taking Leadership Action, OneCommunity offers bilingual assistance to help families build leadership skills and learn to work with their children and their schools to cultivate literacy. “Not only are we encouraging families and kids to read, but they are learning English at the same time,” notes Diana Gonzales Worthen, a co-founder of OneCommunity and chairman of its board. The program also includes a summer reading club called Feed Your Brain or Alimenta Tú Cerebro, which provides books to area families. Cultural festivals and other events are held to spread key messages about early literacy and distribute books, backpacks and reading activities.

Rather than focusing on a single community, [AR Kids Read](#), a CSI site serving **Pulaski County**, recruits and trains volunteer tutors throughout central Arkansas. Tapping local businesses, nonprofits, churches, civic organizations and government agencies, the program has placed over 400 tutors in more than 40 schools across three school districts to work with children with reading skills below grade level from kindergarten to fifth grade. The program also provides age-appropriate books to children in all three school districts in the county.

Opportunities and Challenges

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation's investment in grade-level reading has helped to attract the attention of national funders to the AR-GLR Campaign. For example, the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) (WKKF) in 2014 awarded the Arkansas Department of Human Services a \$1 million, two-year grant to redesign the state's birth-to-5 early learning standards, identify a new kindergarten-entry assessment tool and create a comprehensive framework to support family engagement. Another WKKF grant, the "Good to Great" initiative, helped Marvell and Prescott establish broad-based advisory committees to improve the quality and availability of early childhood programs. The program provides coaching, professional development and other resources for early care staff and helps to align child care programs with pre-K to third-grade programs in the public schools.



The Arkansas Community Foundation, which has begun playing a larger role in AR-GLR, has also made a commitment to repurpose an existing fund to help support summer programs aimed at boosting grade-level reading proficiency.

At the federal level, a new grant to expand access to high-quality preschool in 18 states, announced at a [White House Summit on Early Education](#) in December 2014, will allow the Arkansas Better Chance program to serve 2,241 new children by providing \$60 million in federal resources. It will also help improve the quality of programs serving a small share of children (5.8 percent or 1,400 of 24,000) now participating in state subsidized early childhood programs. In addition, Arkansas Head Start programs will receive \$5 million to expand opportunities for infants and toddlers in Hot Springs, Jonesboro and Pine Bluff.

Despite this new funding, pre-K programs serve just 50 percent of eligible children, and the state pre-K program hasn't seen an increase in funding since 2008. "We still need to get the message out so that state legislators understand that we need to be able to serve all children in need with the same level of quality," notes Duran.

"Arkansas still has a lot of work to do. We have some children who are not accessing services even when they are eligible for a variety of reasons," says Tonya Williams of the Arkansas Department of Human Services. "It's all about raising the bar and helping everyone understand how we can impact a child's future."