The Georgia Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

WINNING THE WAR for Reading Proficiency

Increase the percentage of Georgia children reading at or above grade level by NAEP standards by the end of third grade from 35 to 60 percent by 2015.
In 2010, U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 14th in the world in reading on global assessments. In the same year, just 32 percent of all U.S. fourth graders were reading at grade level. This is not just a crisis for poor and minority students. It is a crisis for all students. The consequences are serious. Children who are not proficient readers by age eight are at a severe disadvantage going forward, because the curriculum for their remaining years in school is designed based on the assumption that the children who use it can read well. The resulting social and economic costs last a lifetime.

This crisis for the nation is also a crisis for our home state of Georgia, where currently only 35 percent of children are proficient readers by the time they get to fourth grade, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Despite our best efforts, we have failed to move the needle in recent years. Why have we failed? It isn’t for lack of work or effort. We have failed because we have not been starting early enough, we have not been focusing on the skills and competencies that matter most, and we have not been actively changing the behaviors of the adults most responsible for the development of children from birth to age eight.

The Georgia Campaign marshals multiple sectors working with
children to hone in on key transactions that make a difference.

Georgia Children Can Win
It is unacceptable that two-thirds of eight- and nine-year-olds in Georgia are not reading at grade level. Unless we do something very different, systematically, across all sectors that touch children from birth to age eight and their families, we cannot change this reality. The Georgia Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a multi-sector effort to marshal the state’s ground troops to do things differently for our children, starting with rallying around a single, common goal: Increase the percentage of Georgia children reading at or above grade level by NAEP standards by the end of third grade from 35 to 60 percent by 2015.

Three major sectors that have contact with children are engaged in this work—public agencies and elected officials; nonprofits and community organizations; and schools and school districts. Participants in the Campaign use the science of reading to decide which high-leverage transactions in their work are most likely to move the needle on the third-grade-reading goal.

The Science Tells Us What to Do
The science of reading is clear. According to nationally recognized experts that the Campaign convened in Georgia, three crucial battles can make a difference in the fight to ensure that children are “reading to learn” by the end of third grade.

First, we must focus on oral language and vocabulary acquisition, starting at birth. According to the science, if children have multiple and varied opportunities and experiences to hear and use language, their brains will be wired to learn how to read. Since language experience begins at birth, crucial transactions in this battle include talking and reading to infants.

Second, we must teach children the relationship between print, sound, and meaning. If children understand the interactions between letters and sounds, they can learn to pronounce words, recognize and use print, read extended text fluently, and communicate ideas and experiences in writing. Key transactions in this battle are evidence-based phonemic awareness activities and reading books out loud.

Third, we must cultivate adult capacity to respond to the needs of each individual child. If adults understand and consistently engage in behaviors that promote literacy and reading success for children, then more children will be on track to read proficiently by the end of third grade. And if adults can discern the strengths and deficits of each child, they can tailor their behavior to help children close their individual gaps. Important
transactions in this battle include teaching parents to talk to their infants and children, training community workers to do developmental screenings on infants, and providing professional development to teachers so they can understand the needs of individual students and target instruction accordingly.

How the Georgia Campaign Works
The Georgia Campaign talks up the science, rallies the three sectors around the common goal, and deploys a specific methodology to help Campaign partners working on the front lines to win the war. Using FranklinCovey’s 4 Disciplines of Execution, the approach enables participants to identify the right work and get it done well. By keeping the focus on executing the key transactions, organizations get demonstrably better at doing the work that matters most. Ultimately, they develop new organizational habits that enable them to keep their attention on the most effective levers for change.

Major stakeholders explicitly agree to fight the same war through the three battles and assume responsibility for moving key indicators that fall within their work. They use science and best practice to help them identify the transactions that are likely to make the biggest difference, and they lift up two or three easily measurable activities that they can rally their ground forces around to move the needle. And they establish simple, achievable measures in the form of “We will increase X to Y by WHEN.” For example, “We will increase the number of chapter books read out loud to students from one per week to four per week by June 30, 2011.”

Over the next four years, Campaign participants will track their commitments and actions with data, and they will publish their unfolding results daily and weekly on visible scoreboards. Every week, they will hold accountability sessions with their foot soldiers, who are doing the work in the trenches, and they will check in regularly with Georgia Campaign staff to report results and get coaching and support to help them execute their work more effectively. For its part, the Campaign will track and aggregate the data and results from all participants, watching closely to make sure the selected transactions are actually contributing to moving the needle on the battles and winning the war.

Increase the percentage of Georgia children reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade from 35 to 60 percent by 2015.

The Science of Reading:
What Everyone Should Know

- Language experience begins at birth. Children’s brains are developing before they speak.
- The brain needs language to develop well.
- Every parent should know that one of their most important roles is giving children words.
- Between ages one and three is the time of most rapid language and vocabulary acquisition.
- Reading is highly dependent on language proficiency, so children need to hear lots of words and have multiple opportunities to use and experience them.
The Campaign is a ground game in multiple communities with multiple public and not-for-profit partners, all moving high-leverage transactions.

**Example: Summer Learning**
In Savannah-Chatham County, multiple sectors are fighting the war by focusing on the summer learning front for children ages four to eight. First, the public school system piloted an evidence-based summer learning program for 123 children entering grades 1, 2, and 3 to help them gain and sustain the oral language, print, and sound skills they need to be on track to “read to learn” by third grade.

The key transaction in the summer learning program was identifying and helping teachers to close learning deficits for individual students. These gaps were identified through rigorous assessments administered to children at the end of the school year. Students received targeted, proven instructional interventions to help them catch up and close the gap. Teachers in the pilot got intensive coaching and support from a team of top language and literacy educators put together by Rollins Center for Teaching and Learning, and parents were being brought into the work via weekly workshops.

Both the Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) have been active partners. Statewide, DECAL ran a parallel summer learning program for over 900 pre-kindergarteners, roughly 125 of whom are in Savannah. DECAL’s program targeted children who had been in Pre-K but needed further intervention, as well as children who had never been enrolled in Pre-K but who needed to catch up in vocabulary, print, and sound skills if they were to enter kindergarten on track to learn to read. DHS supported parent engagement and summer learning interventions for some of Georgia’s highest risk children—those who are in foster care. The Georgia Campaign is documenting results and best practices in the summer learning pilot, and this model will be expanded to other sites across the state over subsequent summers.

**Example: Screening for Developmental Disabilities**
Children who arrive in kindergarten with undetected developmental disabilities and undiagnosed health conditions face a daunting uphill climb on the path to reading proficiency. Focusing its fight on the school readiness front, the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) has decided that the most important work it can do right now is to increase the number of infants and toddlers who get...
screened and referred to appropriate early interventions.

DPH is concentrating on key transactions in the third battle—adult responsiveness to the needs of individual children. The foot soldiers in its fight are pediatricians, family physicians, community workers, and child care providers. Core Campaign activities include training these adults to administer the nationally recognized Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), referring infants and toddlers to appropriate programs, and teaching parents how to talk and read effectively to their children. The goal is to make sure that all children get what they need so they can enter kindergarten on track to learn to read.

DPH’s commitment is deep. It is piloting its grade-level-reading work in four out of 18 total districts across the state, and each district has designated a Campaign liaison that monitors and reports out work on the county front lines. DPH is training more than 250 adults to administer the ASQ in its first year of work in the Georgia Campaign.

Example: Reading to Children, Every Day
One of the most important things adults can do to help children become proficient readers is to give them words in warm, interactive, and positive environments. One of the best ways to do this is to read out loud to children and talk to them about the story. When the YMCA of Metro Atlanta recently gathered its Pre-K and afterschool program leaders together, the organization’s CEO galvanized the group with his vision for grade-level reading as part of the YMCA’s work going forward. YMCA leaders rallied around the science and decided that their effort on the Georgia Campaign would focus on the crucial transaction of reading out loud.

The YMCA touches more than 8,000 youngsters a day. By working to increase the number of books read out loud to children every day inside of YMCA facilities as well as at home, and by training its program leaders and parents to read and discuss stories effectively, this major nonprofit community organization is fighting all three Campaign battles through a single activity. The goal is to make progress on the school readiness front by reading more books out loud to 1,500 children in the first year, increasing to 5,000 children a year by 2015.

disabilities face an uphill climb on the path to reading proficiency.
The National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

Goal: all children will read at or above grade level by the end of third grade

75+ foundations have joined forces to galvanize the nation.

The National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

The Georgia Campaign is part of a national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. In the national Campaign, more than 75 foundations have joined forces to galvanize the nation around the common goal that every child will read at grade level by the end of third grade. It is a 10-year effort to close the gap in reading achievement that separates low-income children from their more affluent peers.

The national Campaign focuses on three fronts: school readiness, summer learning, and school attendance. Its daily work includes building national and state networks and coalitions around this urgent issue, meeting with major stakeholders and putting the third-grade-reading goal on everyone’s lips, steering investments toward on-the-ground programs that work, and developing and strengthening Campaigns in selected states, including Georgia.

You can learn more about the national Campaign by visiting www.gradelevelreading.net.

Join the Georgia Campaign
If your work has an impact on children from birth to age eight and their families, you, too, can join the Campaign, amplify the right work, and help win the war for grade-level reading in Georgia. Visit and “like” us on Facebook: Georgia Campaign for Grade-Level Reading! Contact us at gradelevelreading.ga@gmail.com.

Photos show DECAL summer Pre-K, Atlanta; Sheltering Arms ELLRC at Dunbar Elementary School, Atlanta; YMCA GLR training, Atlanta; Summer Learning Pilot, Savannah; and DPH ASQ screenings, Savannah.

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