THE GLR CAMPAIGN’S 2020 GOAL:

- A promising trend line and sustainable momentum toward closing the reading proficiency gap
- A dozen states or more have increased by at least 100 percent the number of low-income children reading proficiently by the end of third grade

The snapshots in the pages that follow provide compelling testimony that time, talent and sweat equity can make a difference, especially when energized by strong leaders and supported by smart investors. Now 240 communities strong, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading can report progress on practically every measure that matters to its 2015 and 2016 milestones. Midway through the decade, we have good reason to be optimistic that what once seemed to some a daunting 2020 numerical goal is coming into sight and, seemingly, within reach. More than a dozen states are on course to increasing substantially the number of low-income children reading on grade level. Several of them will make it. Others will come close.

Having spent the past two decades steeped in a culture that honors constructive dissatisfaction as the fuel for continuous improvement, it is unsurprising that the GLR Campaign’s senior leaders have spent more time interrogating our apparent successes than celebrating them. That inquiry-based process of learning and reflection has yielded several important insights and lessons.

1 **Timing and tactics matter.** The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is the grateful beneficiary of heroic predecessors and fortuitous timing. Moreover, some in-course tactical tilts such as attaching to the consensus around high school graduation accelerated progress and expanded the proverbial big tent.

2 **The “stake in the ground” approach combined with an enabling “can do” narrative is a powerful force for mobilizing action.** Although the twin propositions of the 2020 goal serve as bedrock for the GLR Campaign, it is the better-known numerical rendering that has become the North Star. From the Moonshot Moment in Florida’s Indian River County to Turn the Page KC in Kansas City, Missouri, to Tahoe Truckee Reads in rural Northern California and so many communities in between, it has worked to have a number as the target. And in those communities as elsewhere, equipping civic leaders and public officials with the information, tools and supports to make the aspirations actionable has helped to spur broad-based support, engagement and civic action.
A common set of success factors is associated with the communities making the most progress. The most prominent and consistent of these factors are a sense of shared ownership of the goal; joint accountability for its attainment; a focus on the most vulnerable children; improvised solutions to data-sharing challenges; a tilt toward investing time, attention and dollars in what’s working; and an emerging acknowledgment that, like leadership, stewardship matters.

A set of well-recognized conditions operates to brake progress in even the most successful communities. Even the most promising programs and initiatives find it difficult to fulfill their potential given the pervasive fragmentation, duplication of effort, proliferation of silos and challenge of gaining timely access to data needed for quality decision making. All this is especially debilitating for communities with little in the way of standing capacity and even less in the form of deployable resources.

Some early strategic decisions have paid off. We were intentional about unbundling grade-level reading into “three assurances” — quality teaching, more seamless systems and community solutions; prioritizing community-owned solutions to advance school readiness, school attendance and summer learning; and betting big on the bottom-up approach represented by local community campaigns. The decision to focus primarily on what Denver’s Mayor Hancock terms the challenges “outside the school door” has broadened the big tent coalition to include constituencies historically averse to becoming enmeshed in public schools. At the same time, it has elicited strong endorsement from educators at all levels who appreciate the GLR Campaign’s consistent reminder that schools cannot not succeed alone. And as several states with multiple GLR communities are approaching the tipping point, our faith in local communities and the bottom-up bet are paying off.

Looking Forward

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading’s action plan for the second half of its decade-long run will seek to solidify and accelerate the progress promised by the proof point communities. As importantly, that action plan will recognize that we currently define and measure “progress” consistent with the better-known of the two challenges captured in the 2020 goal — that of moving the needle. The lesser-known and longer-term challenge focuses on closing the reading proficiency gap. At present, double-digit gaps persist and co-exist with good progress in every state and almost every GLR community. It seems reasonable to question whether the moving-the-needle approach to progress may be inadequate to the task of producing the desired “sustainable momentum” toward closing the reading proficiency gap.
More Hopeful Futures, the GLR Campaign initiative scheduled for formal launch in 2017, will encourage and support a “bigger outcomes” approach — increments of positive change large enough to move the needle and close the gap. In many ways, the “bigger outcomes” strategy will reflect the bingo matrix: doubling down on readiness, attendance and summer learning; lifting up parent success and healthy child development as critical determinants of early school success; prioritizing children and families in public housing; promoting systemic solutions to the data challenges; and employing technology to assist with all of the above.

Those programmatic elements will sit within a larger strategy built to reflect our bias toward both action and reflective practice, our insistence on back mapping, driving with data and forming coalitions of the willing. Moreover, the focus on “bigger outcomes” will bring additional strategic priorities:

- **Advocating for data-driven, technology-enhanced early warning and response systems** that will allow timely identification of and intervention with children who are veering off the pathways leading to readiness, attendance and summer learning.
By the close of 2015:

- Improving third-grade reading proficiency, school readiness, attendance/chronic absence and summer learning for children from low-income families will have emerged as priorities for public officials and influential constituencies across the nation.

- Early learning, healthy on-track development and successful parents will be more widely recognized as essential contributors as to success in the early grades.

By the close of 2016:

- Communities in the Grade-Level Reading Network will serve as proof points for improving school readiness, attendance/chronic absence, summer learning and reading proficiency in the early grades, with at least 100 communities showing progress in one of the areas and at least 50 communities in 15 states showing progress in at least two areas.

---

**MILESTONES**

- **Unbundling readiness, attendance and summer learning** to allow more granular attention to the drivers of improved outcomes in each of these domains.

- **Extending the collective impact framework** to accommodate and support solutions design and development processes that capture the stored value of the GLR Network’s distributed strengths, experience and expertise.

“What crystallizes the moral imperative to act is the knowledge that acting could make a difference.” That admonition (learned from Jesuits and now credited to me by Google) should remind us that we have good reason to chart a path forward with a bias toward action. The 62 GLR communities recognized as Pacesetters since 2012 make a compelling case that, in this instance, action already is making a difference.

As you review the data in the pages that follow, hold close and take to heart another admonition that serves as fuel and guide: “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.” (Google still credits this to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.)

*Ralph Smith*  
MANAGING DIRECTOR