Introduction and Background

READING PROFICIENCY by the end of third grade is a critical milestone on a child’s path to high school graduation and success later in life because it marks the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Students who have not mastered reading by that time are 13 times more likely to drop out of high school and struggle throughout their lives.
Research shows that children from low-income families are particularly vulnerable to missing this important educational milestone. They often enter kindergarten with a significant deficit in reading skills—80 percent start out so far behind that they do not catch up and are unable to read proficiently by the end of third grade. The persistence and pervasiveness of this achievement gap have led to a sobering realization that there are a large and growing number of children who are falling beyond the reach of schools. In addition to starting school behind in their reading skills, low-income children are more likely to miss so much school that they fall further behind
during the school year, and lose even more ground over the summer when school is out because of limited access to learning enrichment opportunities. Alone, any of these factors could be disabling. But in combination, the consequences are dire. By the end of third grade, many of the children facing this threefold challenge have been effectively eliminated from on-grade academic performance and are on course to dropout status. We can no longer solely rely on or expect schools to solve this crisis. To reverse this course, we must broaden our focus and move with urgency to provide children from low-income families with a coordinated system of support and intervention that will make a difference.

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR Campaign) was launched in 2010 to address this significant barrier to creating a path out of poverty for low-income children by supporting common-sense solutions at the federal, state, and local levels. The GLR Campaign is a collaborative effort by foundations, nonprofit partners, business leaders, public schools, health and housing agencies, libraries and other partners across the nation to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, career and active citizenship. By 2020, the GLR Campaign aims to at least double the number of children from low-income families reading proficiently at the end of third grade in a dozen or more states. Over 285 communities in 42 states have joined the GLR Campaign and taken up the challenge of moving the needle and closing the gap on reading proficiency. This extensive network of communities is powered by coalitions of service providers, public systems, private-sector organizations and advocacy groups and supported by over 250 family foundations, community foundations, United Ways and individual donors.  

Momentum Is Building!

More than 285 communities in 42 states across the nation, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands with 2,300 local organizations and 250+ state and local funders, including 130 United Ways, have joined the GLR Campaign.

A Solutions-Focused Approach

Tackling the grade-level reading crisis requires strategies to rebuild what is now a tangle system of early care and early grade education by using grade-level reading proficiency as a unifying goal; promoting quality teaching for every child; supporting community solutions to address lack of school readiness, chronic absence and summer learning loss; to help parents succeed in their critical roles as first teachers and best advocates; and to ensure healthy, on-track development for children starting with quality, easily accessible prenatal care.  

School Readiness: Just as there is an achievement gap in school performance, there is a school readiness gap that separates low-income students from their more affluent peers. Learning begins long before a child enters kindergarten. From birth, children soak up words, rhymes, songs and images. Research shows that as early as 18 months, low-income kids begin to fall behind in literacy skill development because they are less likely to be read or spoken to regularly or to have access to books, literacy-rich environments, high-quality early care, and pre-k programs. As a consequence, these children may hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their middle-in-
come peers before reaching kindergarten.

**Attendance/Chronic Absence:**
Far too many of our nation's children are missing too many days of school. Chronic absence is a measure of how much school a student misses for any reason. It is a broader measure than truancy, which only tracks unexcused absences. Starting in the early grades, the percentage of students missing 15 or more days of the school year can reach remarkably high levels, and these early absences can rob students of the time they need to develop literacy skills resulting in missing the third-grade reading benchmark. A recent report released by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights found that more than 6.5 million of our nation's students fit that description. In response to this crisis, the U.S. Department of Education launched “Every Student, Every Day”: the first-ever national, cross-sector initiative to eliminate chronic absenteeism in our nation's schools. The GLR Campaign has partnered with Attendance Works to provide expertise and support for programs and communities focused on eradicating chronic absence.

**Summer Learning:**
Too many children lose ground academically over the summer months. Without access to the enriching activities available to more-affluent peers, research shows that children from low-income families lose as much as three months of reading comprehension skills over the summer. By the end of fifth grade, they are nearly three grade levels behind their peers. This issue is called the Summer Slide or Summer Learning Loss. The GLR Campaign has partnered with The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) to provide expertise and support for programs and communities for summer learning as a solution for equity and excellence in education.

**Supporting Parent Success:**
Helping parents to succeed as parents is the most important strategy for their child's success throughout life. Parents play the most powerful and influential role in their children's lives. As their children's first teacher, brain builder, tech navigator, advocate and coach, parents set the stage for success in the early years and early grades. Parents can best ready children for school, establish good school attendance habits and prevent summer learning loss.

Parents are the "secret sauce!" The GLR Campaign developed Supporting Parent Success Resource Guides (gradelevel-reading.net/parents). Each guide addresses the nine essential competencies parents need to support their children's success; offers proven and promising programs, tools and resources; describes inspiring community efforts; and provides ways to measure impact.
**Healthy, On-track Development:** We know that learning begins at birth and that healthy development greatly impacts children's ability to learn: Children who are on track in their physical, social and emotional, cognitive, and verbal development are more successful learners from their earliest years, and they are more likely to become proficient readers. The Healthy Readers Initiative of the GLR Campaign focuses on strategies to ensure that children from low-income families are in good health and developing on track at four key milestones in their development from birth through third grade: born healthy, thriving at three, ready at five, and present and engaged in the early grades. The GLR Campaign developed the Growing Healthy Resources Guides (grade-levelreading.net/healthy) to identify important children's health issues and integrate strategies that address them.

**Public Housing: A Critical Link**

More than one million children from birth to age 8 are living in public housing in the United States. From Florida to California and from Kansas to Massachusetts, housing authorities are joining the GLR Campaign's nationwide movement to promote early reading and put young children on the path to success. By embracing grade-level reading as a goal of the supportive services they provide, housing authorities are showing that they can break the cycle of hopelessness.

During a ceremony in Tampa, Florida on April 29, Secretary Castro announced the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) partnership with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to promote the great work Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) are doing as partners in their local grade-level reading campaigns and to encourage and support other PHAs in joining their local campaigns. The aim of this partnership is to help to ensure that critical GLR Campaign strategies are reaching families living in public housing. "Empowering our children with the basic skills they need to become successful helps them to reach their full potential," said Castro. "There's no more important mission than to use housing as a platform for success and we need to make certain that our residents, particularly their children, have every opportunity that education can provide."

Public housing operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all year round. Because public housing can engage with kids and their parents at all times, it is a perfect setting for a two-generational strategy—one that supports parents in order to support kids.

In a child's first 18 years, only 9 percent of his or her time is spent in school; the remaining 91 percent is home-based. This provides a tremendous opportunity for affordable housing providers to work with parents to significantly affect what happens in that 91 percent space. The shared focus on supporting students' literacy development and academic achievement has fostered a strong partnership between the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and afterschool programs across the country. For example, Boulder Housing Partners (Boulder PHA) in Colorado has 19 years of experience as the sponsor of a unique local program: Bringing School Home, a joint venture with the I Have a Dream Foundation of Boulder County. This program provides comprehensive and seamless housing and education support to kids and their families from second grade through post-secondary completion. This 15 year-long commitment features in-school and classroom support, after-school tutoring, enrichment activities, a summer school program, parent support...
and education and a college scholarship. By being centered in BHP public housing community centers, this extraordinary partnership places public housing at the center of and as a platform for educational achievement.

In Massachusetts, the **Boston Housing Authority** works with Raising a Reader (RAR), an early literacy and parent engagement program, to create curriculum-based playgroups for parents and their kids, ages 0-8. The housing authority property manager rotates RAR book bags through these playgroups allowing kids to take home a bright red bag filled with award-winning books to read with family members. In addition, RAR connects kids to their local libraries through events that celebrate reading. The housing authority also has aided efforts to reduce asthma among residents – which can lead kids to miss school – and to create healthy homes. Efforts include Breathe Easy at Home, which works to provide families with access to critical information and resources to create a home free from health and safety hazards.

In Florida, the **Sarasota Public Housing Authority** has developed innovative approaches to addressing grade-level reading issues in its community. In particular, SHA partnered with The Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to help introduce Vroom, a program developed by the Bezos Family Foundation to share the importance of early brain development with parents that includes a free app to support early literacy. Vroom has been piloted with 300 families in the Suncoast region, of which Sarasota public housing residents
are a subset. The Sarasota PHA also has created data-sharing agreements with the local public school system and developed collaborative relationships with a wide variety of community partners located in Sarasota. “This is the clarion call for our industry: PHAs can and should join with community partners to invest in early childhood literacy, which is our best bet to break the generational cycle of poverty and to give our kids a real opportunity in life,” said William Russell.

In Idaho, the Housing Authority of the City of Pocatello has teamed up with Parents as Teachers, a GLR Campaign implementation partner and proven parent education program that provides in-home visits with parents and kids, from conception to kindergarten. HACP staff is prepping an MOU with United Way and the Pocatello School District to roll out a comprehensive program beginning this August. They are focusing their work on Pre-K and K kids in one targeted elementary school with attention to school readiness, learning to read, and parent engagement.

In California, the Housing Authority of Contra Costa County (HACCC) has partnered with the Pittsburg Unified School District on summer learning activities at several housing sites where 80 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals; about 500 meals are served each week. The agency is partnering with First Book to distribute over 7,000 books to help families begin to build home libraries. HACCC currently supports various programs ranging from homework assistance, reading/story time and computer training at two of its family complexes. It also maintains two libraries for kids 0-5 years of age. Over the summer months, the agency provides services and literacy programs to families and kids between 0-8 at all of its public housing developments. HACCC has a strong partnership with the local library to ensure that every child has a library card and helps foster a weekly library visit tradition among its families. Believing it’s never too soon to talk about reading, agency staff send residents with a new baby a congratulatory note and a book, reminding them of the importance of reading. Staff also give out books to families when they...
**Where to Start:**

- provide space for early learning, after-school and summer programs
- host back-to-school picnics and hang door knockers to remind families when school starts
- create parenting programs that teach how to build vocabularies and develop early reading skills
- partner with local elementary schools to coordinate programs and services for families
- open a satellite library at your housing site to give families access to books and computers
- work with homeless families to provide a stable environment for children to learn
- avoid moving housing choice voucher families in the middle of the year
- eliminate mold and other asthma triggers that contribute to school absenteeism
- provide summer food programs to ensure that children are eating well when school is out

**What Public Housing Authorities Can Do**

- Launch a school readiness messaging and outreach campaign to ensure that public housing-affiliated parents, caregivers, child care providers and early educators have ready access to the information, tools and supports that can help build essential competencies that promote early literacy and the healthy development of the kids in their care.
- Launch a community-wide attendance awareness campaign using events such as Attendance Awareness Month, parent/teacher conferences, PTA meetings and back-to-school night.

come into the agency office.

In Iowa, the Marshalltown Housing Authority has secured over $9 million in federal funds and $1 million in matching funds and in-kind contributions to reduce lead poisoning among kids. With these funds, they have implemented several programs to help eliminate dangerous lead-based paint hazards and other housing-related health and safety hazards such as mold and moisture, radon, pests and other asthma triggers from lower-income homes. To date, their efforts have served over 600 residents and reduced the lead poisoning rate for kids under age six by almost 50 percent.

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