

Report on the Community Forum: “The Reading Priority”

Public Life Foundation of Owensboro

On November 13, 2013 nearly 50 citizens devoted a half-day at the Logsdon Community Center to examine the challenges our community faces to improve and advance reading. Guest Speaker Christy Clouse, Regional Director of the Imagination Library, was followed by a panel discussion and open forum that featured Sherry Baber (Hager Preschool), Karen Reed (Eastview Elementary School), and Robyn Mattingly (America Reads and RSVP programs). All participants underscored the critical importance of reading.

The panel discussion was followed by small group dialogue. Participants identified ways in which various segments of our community can contribute to this community challenge.

Nearly 300 ideas were suggested.

Participants included teachers, retired teachers, pre-school professionals, reading specialists, school administrators, school board members, bankers, foundations, librarians, youth center managers, social workers, youth and education advocates, ministers, higher education professionals and others.

Participants received discussion guides that included data comparing local third grade and high school reading levels with other Kentucky school districts. The most recent report was released on September 27, 2013.

For a copy of the Public Life Foundation Discussion Guide: www.plfo.org.



Recognizing the vital need to advance and improve reading in our community...



What more can churches* do?

*Ministers, Sunday School classes, youth groups, etc.

- Use church vans to provide transportation to our local public library.
- Incorporate reading time into after school programs.
- Devote a portion of the church newsletter to children's reading tips, the importance of reading to children, book clubs, etc.
- Establish or add to a church library with children's books.
- Open the neighborhood around the church for reading time, book clubs, tutoring, etc.
- Encourage churches to recruit teens from their congregations to help youth with reading. (This can often be credited to community service hours.)
- Give prizes to youth members or youth in the neighborhood for reading achievements.

What more can our philanthropic community do?

- Award grants to organizations and programs that improve reading skills in our youth.
- Acknowledge and showcase the work of foundations and charitable organizations that support reading programs.
- Fund awareness campaigns that stress the vital importance of reading to children at a young age.
- Fund awareness programs that inform the public of community resources and programs.
- Provide matching grants for contributions to programs such as The Imagination Library, Public Library early reading programs, Head Start, America Reads and more...
- Convene a meeting of all the local foundations and make a presentation on the vital need to support reading programs.
- Promote the need for volunteers to assist children with reading.
- Fund grants that facilitate collaboration among organizations that focus on reading and youth.
- Fund research to identify effective models that improve and advance reading.



What more can coaches and mentors do?

- Work with teachers and be advised when players have reading challenges. Support, encourage, recruit tutors, etc.
- Serve as spokespersons for programs such as Imagination Library.
- Show by example by being seen reading books, magazines, etc.
- Share sports articles and books – especially with students who have difficulties with reading.
- Display posters showing athletes reading and place around a school or youth center.
- Identify a book or article that a sports team or teams could read and discuss together. The book could be about sports, courage, teamwork, fortitude, leadership, etc.
- Require a minimum “B” average to participate in sports.
- Check on resources that may be available through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.
- Advise mentors when youth need special help with reading. Mentors could tutor or help line up one, provide encouragement, etc.
- Stress to parents ways to make the greatest impact by reading to their children.



What more can professional and fraternal groups do?

(e.g., lawyers, accountants, retired teachers, human resources, Masons, Oddfellows, VFW, American Legion, Fraternal Order of Police, Elks, etc.)

- Encourage groups to volunteer or support reading programs (i.e., RSVP and America Reads).
- Realtors could place literature on programs such as Imagination Library in new home packets.
- Encourage organizations to adopt a program, school or classroom to help youth with reading difficulties.
- Sponsor a project such as an “I Love to Read Day.”



What more can child care centers do?

- Work with the Imagination Library leaders to get books in the homes of all children enrolled in child care and preschool.
- Conduct age-appropriate training and mentoring

programs for child care workers and preschool teachers so that they know how to read to children in the most effective way.

- Identify if there are impediments that make it difficult for parents/guardians to read to their child. Draw a professional team together to eliminate those impediments.
- Implement successful models such as “STARZ,” “Race to the Top” and “Preschool Pals.”



What more can *PTOs, school councils, booster clubs, school boards and educational foundations* do?

- Make literacy and the challenge of improving reading the number one focus of our schools and community.
- Provide parents with tips on reading to their children.
- Establish a literacy council to monitor reading skills and develop strategies to improve reading, particularly at a young age.
- Challenge groups (such as those referred to above) to come up with at least one thing they can do to advance or improve reading in their school or district.
- Develop and fund a promotional campaign that stresses the importance of reading to their children, particularly at a young age. Use social media, testimonials, etc.
- Facilitate collaboration between city-county family resource centers, school nurses, social services, child protective services and others in order to work holistically to meet the external needs of children.
- Partner with existing organizations to implement activities and programs that promote literacy and

improve reading skills.

- Schedule parent conferences and school board meetings outside parent work hours. Be more welcoming to parents.
- Assist families in obtaining library cards.
- Develop age-appropriate summer reading lists, circulate and provide incentives for participation.

What more can *parents/guardians* do?

- Read to their child at least three times per week.
- Learn how to enhance the reading experience with questions, storytelling, etc.
- Attend school events and meetings: chili suppers, carnivals, book fairs, PTO, council, teacher conferences, etc.
- Keep up with your child’s progress and challenges.
- Read the materials that are sent home with a child.
- Contact other parents/guardians to encourage them to attend meetings and events.
- At PTO, council and other meetings, share what’s working for you and your child.
- Organize a neighborhood reading club for various ages.
- Make it a point for your child to see you reading.
- Recognize teachers, aides, volunteers, and others for their important work.



What more can neighborhood alliances do?

- Inform neighborhood leaders (yours and others) how the development of good readers in their neighborhoods will lead to safer, more neighborly and active residents.
- Form a neighborhood book/reading club – for everyone and a “tree house” club just for kids.
- Develop a program whereby everyone in a neighborhood reads the same book and then comes together to talk about it.
- Develop a neighborhood book exchange or “red box” recycling program.
- Sign up children in your neighborhood in the Imagination Library program.
- Donate/collect unsold books and magazines from garage sales; create a neighborhood library.
- At neighborhood block parties or family fun nights, feature children reading or an adult reading from a children’s book.
- Recruit volunteer tutors from the neighborhood.
- Encourage churches in the neighborhood to get involved in reading projects.
- Assign various neighborhoods to elected officials to monitor and promote reading programs.



What more can libraries do?

- Conduct a public awareness campaign to inform the community about the reading programs already offered through the public library and school libraries.
- Offer/expand summer reading and story time programs.
- Bring back the Bookmobile.
- Take library personnel or volunteers into child care centers, Head Start, after-school locations, community centers and other locations for special reading programs and to assist youth in securing library cards.
- Start a “red box” program.
- Develop special programs for comic book readers.
- Bring in children’s authors to read, illustrate and meet with children.
- Organize a reading fair at Smother’s Park downtown, the mall, RiverPark Center and other locations to promote reading and educate parents/guardians.
- Expand multi-language reading materials and staff for our growing immigrant community.



What more can the media do?

- Invite representatives of area print, television (commercial, public, public access), radio, billboard, social media, and specialty advertising to learn more about the importance of reading to children.
- Use school district public access channels as a tool for promoting reading.
- Develop human interest stories to enhance the campaign (i.e., Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library).
- Develop an effective theme to challenge our community to significantly improve reading levels.



What more can public officials do?

- Participate in forums, community meetings, etc. to learn more about reading issues and challenges facing our community.
- Make our reading challenges an urgent, top community priority.
- Be open to partnering with school districts to fund reading programs.

- Coalesce with public officials across the state to collaboratively address this statewide challenge.
- Develop or participate in community-wide programs such as “I love to read day,” “Read with a Cop/ Firefighter Day,” “Caught in the Act of Reading,” etc.
- Issue a proclamation to promote “Reading/Literacy Month” or a related promotion.

What more can CEO’s, plant and store managers do?

- Complete a checklist of activities that support reading to earn a Golden Apple Award.
- Allow employees to take time off with pay to attend meetings and events at their children’s school.
- Invite employees to bring used books (particularly children’s books) to their workplace for a recycled book program.
- Provide financial support and/or volunteer work for programs such as Imagination Library and America Reads.
- Encourage CEOs and other employees to read to children at preschools, child care, Head Start and other locations.
- Direct retail store cashiers to invite customers to contribute a dollar to a reading program.
- Following a tour of a plant or store where a relative works, invite the children of an employee to write a letter about their experience. Give an award for the best letter.
- Send age-appropriate books to the children of employees on their birthday, at Christmas or other occasions.





What more can social workers do?

- Develop trusting relationships with client families and encourage them to place a high value on reading in the early years.
- Provide parents/guardians with tips on how to read to their child.
- Help the family receive books from Imagination Library or other sources.
- If there is an impediment to reading (e.g., a parent or guardian who may not be able to read, a disability, etc.), develop a strategy to overcome the impediment or help the client find the help they need.
- Seek ongoing training on literacy education.



What more can retired individuals do?

- Read to a child and/or help a child with reading through programs such as America Reads, a project of the Retired Senior Volunteer Corps (RSVP).
- Encourage seniors to recruit other seniors to read to children or help children with reading.

- Assist with book collection drives.
- Contribute financially to reading programs.
- Name a reading program as a beneficiary in estate plans.
- Serve as a mentor for an at-risk child.



What more can civic and service clubs do?

(e.g., Junior League, Rotary Club, Pilot Club, Kiwanis Club, Optimist Club, Civitan Club, Chamber Young Professional, Leadership Owensboro/Emerge Owensboro, etc.)

- Embrace as a top organizational priority the community challenge of lifting reading proficiency.
- Invite reading specialists, school administrators, teachers and others to speak at a regular meeting of your organization.
- Organize a benefit to assist a reading program such as America Reads or Imagination Library.
- Encourage members to volunteer and read to children in schools, child care centers, Head Start, youth centers, etc.
- Encourage members to serve on various governing or advisory boards of organizations that are dedicated to reading improvement.
- Collaborate with other civic-service clubs to maximize impact.
- Deliver books to child care centers, laundries, youth centers, hospitals and other locations where children can read or be read to.



What more can *youth and community centers* do?

(e.g., Cliff Hagan Boys and Girls Club, H. L. Neblett Center, Dugan Best Center, Girls Inc., churches, etc.)

- Recruit mentors, readers and tutors to assist youth with reading and homework. (College and high school students, clubs, National Honor Societies and others can count this type of volunteer work toward community service hours.)
- Inform parents, guardians, teachers and others that these programs and services are available.
- Provide/expand training for parents/guardians on how to most effectively read to children.
- Remove barriers (e.g., transportation) so that more youth can benefit from community centers.
- Increase dialogue with parents and stress the importance of reading and education.
- Send home with the kids daily reading and learning tips.
- As part of your routine, communicate and collaborate with other youth and community centers.
- Identify age-appropriate books and invite all to read the same book and join a reading-discussion club.

Now... we have all these terrific ideas! Where do we go from here?

Remember: This is a community challenge. We need to have educators at the forefront, but we also need to involve people from all walks of life.

We need people like YOU to...

1. **Share these ideas with people you know who fall within one or more of these segments of our community: a coach, a mentor, a youth center director, a retired individual, a business leader, a neighbor, and others.**
2. **Report who you shared these ideas with and, if possible, obtain their contact information so we can follow-up with who is doing what.**
3. **Stay connected as participation is monitored and successes are celebrated!**