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Literacy in Arkansas: The Importance of Learning to Read

*Part of a series exploring issues
from The Community Foundation's
Aspire Arkansas report.*

Boosting Grade Level Reading



As a person who loves to read, it is hard to imagine a child who does not know the joy of a delightful book, much less a child who does not have the reading skills to achieve his or her dreams. Unfortunately, the reality is that only 37 percent of Arkansas’ third grade students are reading at grade level.

Every Arkansas child should be able to read at grade level by the third grade,

and reaching that goal is achievable! Reading proficiently by the end of third grade improves:

- A child’s ability to learn and his or her academic outcomes as measured by standardized tests, grades and course failures;
- A child’s likelihood of graduating from high school;
- A child’s non-academic outcomes such as self-esteem and behavioral issues; and
- The strength of our state’s economy.

For the past few years, Arkansas Community Foundation has been associated with the statewide Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading led by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. We know that these five actions are critical in reaching our goal.

1. Improve school readiness.
2. Reduce chronic absence.
3. Stop summer learning loss.
4. Strengthen parent and community engagement.
5. Enhance classroom instruction.

Arkansas Community Foundation is working on a new initiative that will help us seek out and offer support to nonprofits who are working in these five areas. We’ll be tracking grants to these organizations statewide and determining how communities are improving grade level reading. We will be targeting our Foundation directed dollars and will be reaching out to our partners who want to engage in this work that changes our children’s future as well as our state’s future.

Stay tuned to hear more!

Heather Larkin

Heather Larkin
President and CEO

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On the cover: Melissa Lawson and her three-year-old daughter Abigail read together as a part of the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) Program.



Students at Park Avenue Elementary in Stuttgart spent the summer reading favorites by Dr. Seuss to help with comprehension and self-exploration in learning.

Summer Learning Programs Build Literacy Skills

When asked what she likes to do during the summer months, Zicariah, a four-year old student at Park Avenue Elementary School’s summer reading camp in Stuttgart, responded “I like coming here because I get to read about hot air balloons and do science experiments with my teacher.”

A Summer Learning Initiative grant from Arkansas Community Foundation recently funded a summer camp at Park Avenue Elementary to help students age four through nine with reading

confidence, comprehension and self-exploration in learning.

By reading Dr. Seuss favorites, students like Zicariah not only learned literacy skills, but also participated in hands-on enrichment activities including music, science, art and math. At the end of the camp, students presented their projects and had the opportunity to explain what they learned.

“While there are challenges with attendance and recruiting staff for



Students who attended the summer learning camp in Stuttgart participated in hands-on learning activities inspired by the books they read that involved building art, science, music and math skills.

summer learning camps like ours, we know that our curriculum provides students with what they need to come back to school in the fall ready to succeed,” said Pam Dean, Principal of Park Avenue Elementary. “Our staff works to ensure students leave here reading at grade-level and that they feel confident in their reading ability.”

Summer Learning grants like these aim to support school and community programs that combat the “summer slide,” the loss of skills when kids are out of school and left without learning accountability. The program was born from a combined effort between the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-level Reading (AR-GLR), the Community Foundation and Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

The Summer Learning Initiative is one of five strategies that the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading aims to implement. As a collaborative effort between nonprofits, families, government agencies, foundations, educators and other key community leaders, AR-GLR is committed to the goal that all Arkansas children will read at grade-level by the end of third grade.

Third grade is a crucial year because studies show that if a student can read proficiently by the end of third grade, they’re more able to shift from learning to read to reading to learn as they rise to fourth grade.

Others have also recognized the importance of taking advantage of the summer months for learning purposes. BearsRead Summer Camp at the University of Central Arkansas is another local effort in Conway that has seen improvement in students’ literacy skills.

The program is implemented by faculty of the College of Education and uses small and large group activities to cover skills in phonics, spelling and vocabulary development. Students participate free of charge and are screened at the beginning to identify skill deficits. The camp even offers special dyslexia interventions.

Dr. Tammy Benson, Professor of Teaching and Learning at UCA, says this is their second year of the program and the waiting list is lengthy. “We’ve seen an increased interest after the first year which has been really encouraging to staff who are pouring their time and resources into the program” said Benson. “We have a method that works and we know that the time students spend with us will equip them for success as they jump back into their regular school routines.”

With summer and fall options available, BearsRead kills two birds with one stone. While the primary goal of the program is to help struggling students read at grade-level by the end of their time attending camp, it also provides UCA graduate students with real hands-on experience conducting tutoring sessions and reading assessments.

By working together, Jeff Whittingham, the graduate program’s coordinator, and Benson believe the two programs have perfect synergy.

“No longer are my students just learning about comprehension strategies, but they are now implementing those strategies and seeing the usefulness of them. Having a positive impact on struggling readers has energized the entire course,” said Whittingham. Benson reported that 35 percent of students who participated in the 2016 summer camp grew at least one grade-level on the QRI, an instrument the staff uses to test reading ability. The future of literacy in Arkansas clearly depends on the availability of programs, like



“We’ve seen an increased interest after the first year which has been really encouraging to staff who are pouring their resources in the program.”

— Dr. Tammy Benson

Professor of Teaching and Learning
University of Central Arkansas

summer learning camps, to children as they are developing critical literacy skills. Currently, 13.7 percent of Arkansans age 16 and older lack basic literacy skills and nearly 19 percent of Arkansans 25 and over do not have a high school diploma or GED, ranking Arkansas at 44 among other states (According to the 2015 Health Rankings report and U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009).

Focusing on the development of childhood literacy and joining efforts with organizations like AR-GLR can help. This strategy can improve our future citizens’ ability to navigate our complex healthcare system, complete simple job applications, encourage the development of their own children and manage personal finances.



Stuttgart’s Summer Learning Day allowed students to showcase their reading projects and highlighted the many achievements of the summer program.

Home Instruction Increases Confidence

When Melissa Lawson heard about a free 30-week home visitation program to enhance her three-year-old daughter's reading and other learning skills, she was intrigued. Her best friend was excited as she told her about Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY). Then Lawson saw a display at the Arkansas Department of Health and made a phone call.

Soon an experienced home visitor, LaShanna Parks, was teaching Melissa new ways to engage Abigail using the HIPPY curriculum. Parks is a 10-year veteran who was a mom in the program with her own three children before becoming a home visitor.

Parks said that she became interested in being a paid home visitor before her children completed the program. Many of the home visitors are graduates of the program. "Bringing this structured curriculum to parents has been rewarding," Parks said. "There is joy in seeing parents help their children learn. And I love it when I see a former student and the mom says, 'My baby has straight As.'"

Abigail knows her alphabet, colors, shapes and is working on her sight words. "She had her 30th visit a few weeks ago and has to wait until September to begin Year 2 of the program," said her mom. In addition to Abigail, Lawson has an infant daughter and an older son diagnosed with autism. She has used parts of the HIPPY curriculum with her son, too.

"We ask parents to spend 15 minutes a day each week on the program," said Parks. "We provide a lot of open-ended questions that allow them to start a conversation with their child about the lessons. And throughout the 30 weeks, we give tips and extended activities beyond the basics."

Lawson says HIPPY is cool. "I didn't know exactly how to teach her what she needs to know before she enters school — things like putting a seed in a baggie and putting it on a window so that they can see the roots grow. That was one of the additional activities both my kids liked best."

To be a part of HIPPY, families must meet income requirements and agree to take an active part in helping their children learn. Most participants are moms, but some fathers complete the HIPPY curriculum with their children. In addition to home visits, HIPPY

families are encouraged to participate in group meetings, go to local libraries and attend community events.

"Abigail loves Reading Rosie — once a week she receives a game or song on my cell phone," Lawson said. Using technology is fun for preschool children and readies them for some of the tools they will use in classrooms.

Staci Croom-Raley, Executive Director of HIPPY USA, said that a love of learning begins at home and, with HIPPY, every child has an opportunity to get ready for success at school. The evidence-based family support model has been proven effective in randomized trials. Working directly in their home with parents of three-, four- and five-year-old children gives the parents tools they need to teach their children.

"The HIPPY model makes sense," she said. "When you focus on the parents and the parents teach their children, not only is the child ready for school, but the parents have the skills they need to participate in their child's education throughout their school years. And parental empowerment and participation have been proven to be strong indicators of student success."

The home visits provide parents or guardians with some "adult time" so that they can ask questions or express concerns to a listening ear. Some parents who have low literacy skills themselves are able to teach their children to read through role play with the home visitor. Often these same parents will become empowered to improve their own literacy skills.

In addition to literacy, the HIPPY curriculum teaches comprehension, science and motor skills. HIPPY wants children to not just be able to read, but to take in the information, have a sense of knowledge and be able to apply what they learn. One valuable result of HIPPY is the confidence it brings to both parents and children.

This year is the 30th anniversary of the HIPPY program, and it has been replicated all over the world. Originally located in New York, the HIPPY USA office moved to Little Rock in 2007. The nature of HIPPY has stayed the same, but today the HIPPY curriculum is available in Spanish and other languages around the world. HIPPY



LaShanna Parks, HIPPY home visitor (left) with Melissa Lawson and daughter Abigail, aged 3.

is also exploring new innovations in digital media to reach more families and enhance its data and research.

Back in the 80s, Arkansas First Lady Hillary Clinton saw the home-based education model in action on a visit to Florida and contacted Avima Lombard, the founder at Hebrew University in Israel. "The story goes that Hillary told Bill she wanted to implement the program and before he knew it, he was going to preschool graduations of HIPPY kids," Croom-Raley said.

Last year there were 9,000 HIPPY home visits each week across the country. Arkansas is one of several states that implement HIPPY programs, and research has shown that HIPPY kids arrive at kindergarten with a reading readiness level above the non-HIPPY kids. They have less absenteeism and more engaged parents. Research has shown that by the third grade, HIPPY kids are reading at grade level and in many instances beyond grade level or significantly higher than non-HIPPY kids.

The program is supported by several funding sources — federal dollars, state dollars and most significantly people who donate funds. "We have an online giving portal and through the ArkansasGives program we have learned a lot about online giving campaigns. We had earned media and matching dollars through ArkansasGives. But more importantly we learned how to operate an online giving campaign and are supporting our local constituencies in learning how to do the same," said Croom-Raley.

To make a donation to HIPPY, visit hippyusa.org.



HIPPYUSA®
Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters



Helping Adults Learn to READ

Betty Furman takes care of many people – relatives who are ill, elderly friends who can no longer drive, friends who can't afford to buy groceries, grandchildren whose mother leaves for work before the sun comes up.

She wants to be able to read so she can take better care of herself. "I need to know how to read," says Furman, of Conway. "I take medicines but I don't even know what I take."

Furman, 77, has tried to learn before, her progress interrupted each time by health problems and life circumstances. Once she was even dropped from the tutoring roster after her teacher went on vacation.

"I need to know how to read. I take medicines but I don't even know what I take."
— Betty Furman

"Then I tried it again," says Furman. "I just keep coming back." She is making progress and credits her tutor, Stacy Lindsey of Greenbrier, who volunteers through Literacy Action of Central Arkansas. Furman and Lindsey have met weekly for about a year.

According to Literacy Action of Central Arkansas, 145,000 Arkansans struggle with basic reading and writing skills, which means they struggle with tasks like reading to their children, writing checks, filling out job applications and more.

Literacy Action volunteers meet one-on-one with students to work on reading and writing skills. Other groups use certified teachers in classrooms and some, use both certified teachers and non-certified volunteers.

The Literacy Council of Crittenden County and the Arkansas State University-MidSouth Adult Education merged recently and is in the process of transferring students who were taught one-on-one by volunteers to classes taught by certified teachers. Volunteers may be available for students who need extra help in the class.

Thomas Schlauch, who was the director of the Literacy Council of Crittenden County and who is the director of the adult education department at the ASU-MidSouth, said classes will be held at a variety of locations to accommodate more students, and class start and end times will be timed to work with public bus schedules.

"What we had noticed was that generally speaking we were able to serve more students in a shorter period of time and really grow the program overall, even though there were occasionally some students who resisted being in a classroom and would rather be provided with one-on-one instruction," says Thomas. Dawn Humphry, lead instructor with the University of Arkansas Cossatot - Howard County Campus, Adult Education, is primarily charged with helping people get their GEDs, but she and her staff and a few volunteers work with basic literacy students, because there is no literacy council in that area to fill that need. "We don't have a literacy council here and we desperately need one," says Humphry.

One of her students, Jack Sanders of Nashville, lived with his grandparents because his mother died when he was young and his father couldn't raise him and his siblings while working at the sawmill.

"They were sharecropping and we had to start sharecropping, too," Sanders recalls. "We missed out on a lot of school because of it."

Sanders started taking classes — four hours a day, four days a week — at UA Cossatot in September 2016. He works with a tutor one-on-one at the university.

"I'm 80 years old and that gives me time to do other things that I need to do, like mowing yards and other things, like chores I need to do around the house and I keep up the church and things like that," he says.

Sanders retired from his position as a heavy equipment operator at Weyerhaeuser 20 years ago, so his goal of getting a GED now is solely personal.

"My grandfather gave me a lot of wisdom but I need to know



about reading and writing," he says. "When you sit down and watch other people writing and you can't do it, it kind of bothers you. It does me."

Another Nashville resident, who asks to be referred to only by her first name, Barbara, is also taking classes at UA Cossatot. "People say I'm really smart but I don't think I'm smart. I think, 'If you only knew that I can't read or write,'" she says, her voice breaking. "I'm so ashamed of it — I don't want anybody to know because people treat you different if they know."

She has been able to travel, even internationally, without being able to read signs by memorizing routes, and she gets close friends to read her mail for her. She writes checks by looking at a page she tore out of one of her reading workbooks earlier this

year. That page shows numbers and the words associated with those numbers and she just copies them onto her checks.

Humphry can identify some of her students' learning barriers but she has not been able to pinpoint what, if anything, is holding Barbara back. She has referred Barbara for testing at Arkansas Counseling and Psychodiagnostics, but she recently learned that her Medicaid insurance won't cover the \$400 exam.

Barbara won't give up, though.

"Before I leave this world, I want to read to my grandson-to-be and I want to read the Bible in church," she says. "Before God takes me out of this world, those are the two things I want to do."

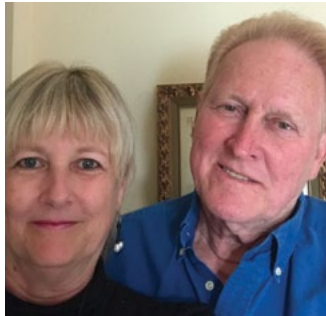


Betty Furman, right, and her tutor Stacy Lindsey meet weekly so that Betty can be tutored in reading skills.



ARKANSAS VIEWPOINTS

How Does Being Able to Read Change Lives and Impact Our Communities?



By Sammy and Kathleen King

Being able to read first and foremost gives you confidence. At 69 years old and over the last five years, Sammy King has spoken out about what it's been like to hide behind not being able to read, and that there was a turning point for him.

"I finally realized if it will help others, just even one person to come forward and get the help they need, it far outweighs my own pain and embarrassment," he said.

So many of us forget what a privilege it is to be able to read. We take it for granted and make a huge assumption that everyone can in this day and age. "So when Sammy says it brings confidence, I'd like to add that it brings confidence to contribute," his wife Kathleen said. "It gives the confidence to bring our unique gifts to the community and for each other. Not just what we already know or have read, but our own special connection to life and others."

The contribution goes both ways. We've experienced the amazing generosity of the tutors and the supporters of Literary Action to give of their time and abilities to read and to truly give back. It takes patience and understanding to stay with helping someone with their challenges when you are able to do something so easily, like being able to read. And it takes enormous trust for the students to say "I need and want help."



By Charles F. Allen, CAO
Arkansas Corrections School System

Throughout our nation, diagnostic assessments reveal that many people enter prison with educational deficits and minimal literacy experiences substantially lower than occurs in the general population. There also is ample research that effective and proven education programs for inmates, 90 percent of whom will be released to return into society, enable those inmates to become productive, contributing neighbors.

In 1973, Arkansas educators and legislative leaders worked together to establish the Arkansas Correctional School District to help the approximately 50 percent of all inmates with no high school diploma or GED to earn their GEDs while incarcerated. In 1996, the Board of Corrections adopted "mandatory education," and in 2005, updates were enacted to create the Arkansas Corrections School System to include vocational education.

The Rand study revealed that inmates who participated in correctional education programs were "43 percent less likely of recidivating (returning) than inmates who did not." For every inmate who does not return to prison, the state saves \$28,000, the annual cost of housing an inmate. An earlier Arkansas study showed that graduate inmates, returning to society, were employed more often; and earned 23 percent more than non-graduates.

In our Spring 2017 graduation, there were 641 graduates, which is 17 percent of the total number of GEDs earned in Arkansas this year. The Corrections School System has produced 23,361 graduates since 1973.

We truly believe the words of the late journalist, Victor Hugo; "He who opens a school door closes a prison."



Reading Tutor Reaps Rewards

Three years ago Danna Blubaugh saw a television news story about AR Kids Read's immediate need for 300 tutors. She responded by going to the organization's website and signing up to tutor at McDermott Elementary School in Little Rock. The mother of three young adults, Blubaugh had never been to the school before becoming a tutor.

Brightly colored walls, large photographs of students in action and an outdoor courtyard make McDermott an inviting learning environment. Principal Amy Cooper said reading tutors are an amazing addition to the school even beyond improving reading skills, "We are a school shaping the whole child. Having community volunteers come in helps our students understand what it is to give back and shows them that one day they can give back to children in their community."

Blubaugh helps students from two second grade classes and has learned that most students see the ability to read chapter books as a big landmark. "The one-on-one experience with a tutor creates a safe space for the students to learn," she said. "Really, it is all about building their confidence."

Teachers match students with tutors and provide books at the students' reading levels, but Blubaugh brings a few tools of her own.

She uses flash cards to help with word recognition and has found that a sticker book is a great icebreaker because all kids like stickers.

"I had to go online and get a new set of 'Ranger Rick' because I love that magazine. Everyone likes to talk about animals," Blubaugh said. "One of the things I like most is that I get to relive teaching my own kids to read."

It gives her great joy to get to know the students, interact with them and make them better readers. "When they get interested in the story and want to read more and more, that is a success. What we are doing is instilling a culture of reading," Blubaugh said.

She is not a professional teacher, and that is not a requirement for tutors. They can spend as much time at the schools as they choose since there are different levels of commitment in terms of hours per week. Blubaugh has been very happy with the support she receives, including seminars and packets of information that help tutors be more effective.

"Do it," is her advice to those on the fence about being a reading tutor. "You get more out of it that you could ever give — the kids are always surprising you."



Tydarrion Diggs, 8, gives a big hug to his reading tutor, Danna Blubaugh, as they walk from his classroom to a location where they can read one-to-one.



Emanuel Clark, 8, reads to his tutor, Danna Blubaugh, in the McDermott Elementary School Library in Little Rock.



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Nearly 19 percent of Arkansans 25 and over (347,032 people) DO NOT have a high school diploma or GED, and over 130,000 have less than a ninth-grade education.

— U.S. Census Community Survey, 2009



In Arkansas, **13.7 percent** of adults age 16 and older lack basic literacy skills.

— Health Rankings, 2015



Arkansas Literary Council tutors contributed **\$1.6 million** worth of service hours.

— Sector, a nonprofit that calculates the value of a volunteer hour



"Literacy is about more than just words and meaning. It is important because it affects peoples' lives directly, impacting their chances of employment, level of income and type of occupation."

— Literacy for Life Foundation



- 2,741 Arkansas adults received free educational instruction
- 4,526 Arkansas adults learned to read or learned to read better
- 982 Arkansas adults learned to write or learned to write better
- 2,087 Arkansas adults learned to speak English or learned to speak English better
- 17,843 personal achievements made by students — 18,377 measurable educational advancements made by students
- 911 Arkansans served as tutors
- 65,711 instruction hours held
- 100+ Arkansas adults currently waiting for a tutor to receive free instruction

— Arkansas Literacy Council, FYE 6/30/15

