

Make a Lasting Impact in Our Communities: Read Out Loud with a Child

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The publication *Nation's Report Card: Fourth-Grade Reading 2000* stated that only 32 percent of fourth-graders read at or above a proficient level. National studies reported by the *Journal of Educational Psychology* in 1996 showed that approximately 75 percent of those with reading problems in third grade still experienced reading difficulties in ninth grade. The social and economic consequences of not reading well can be cumulative and profound: failure to attain a high school diploma, a barrier to higher education, underemployment or unemployment, and difficulty in managing personal and family life.

This is an important issue for local government professionals because these students are future community leaders, taxpayers, and users of community services. Managers and their staff members must be involved today to ensure the success of our communities' youth. One important way to do so is to partner actively with local schools in improving the reading skills of struggling students.

Why Reading?

Reading is the foundation of all learning. The adage that maintains that, through the third grade, students learn to read, after which they read to learn, suggests that children who struggle with reading early will struggle with subject content later. The longer the child continues to struggle, the further behind he becomes, leading to a downward spiral of frustration, apathy, and dropping out (mentally, if not physically).

Reading is the capstone of President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001. Earlier this year, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige reinforced this policy by stating, "Children who are never taught to read well may never perform at their full potential. If they are left behind because of poor reading instruction, they may be left behind entirely."

Results of the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress report on the nation's fourth-graders show a relatively stable pattern in students' average reading scores during the last decade. Thirty-two percent of fourth-graders are reading at or above the proficient level, the goal set by the National Assessment Governing Board. Thirty-seven percent, however, fall below the basic level (see box).

NAEP Reading Achievement Levels for the Fourth Grade

Basic. Able to demonstrate an overall understanding of what they read. Able to make relatively obvious connections between what they read and their own experiences.

Proficient. Able to demonstrate an overall understanding of the text, providing inferential as well as literal information. Able to draw conclusions and connect to their own experiences.

Advanced. Able to generalize about topics in the reading and demonstrate an awareness of how authors compose and use literary devices.

Source: National Center of Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1992–2000 Reading Assessments as reported in the Nation’s Report Card, Fourth Grade Reading Highlights 2000, published by the U.S. Department of Education.

Of equal concern is that, while the scores of the highest-performing students have risen, the scores of the lowest-performing students have declined. Similarly, African-American, Hispanic, and American Indian students score significantly lower than Caucasian and Asian/Pacific Islander students.

The highest-scoring students were reading more than 11 pages per day; those who read for fun every day achieved the highest average scores.

Reading out loud increases a student’s fluency—the ability to read a text accurately and quickly, recognizing words automatically and comprehending the text—and her command of the language.

Encouraging local government employees to volunteer one hour per week in an elementary school reading program can make a significant impact on the future health of their communities. For the past two years, Ogden, Utah, employees have read aloud with elementary school children, and the results have been positive.

Evidence of Success

Ogden, a community of 77,000 people, is the governmental, cultural, and social center of northern Utah. World-class outdoor recreation areas exist in the community’s backyard. Ogden hosted the curling event for the 2002 Winter Olympic Games, and two of the largest Olympic events—the downhill and Super G—were held at Snow Basin Ski Resort, located at the base of Mount Ogden.

During the academic years 2000–2001 and 2001–2002, the city and four private companies partnered with five elementary schools. Volunteers read one-on-one with children for up to 20 minutes each. Children read aloud with a different tutor each day for up to four days a week. City employees who donated one hour per week of their own time (such as during lunchtime) in an elementary school volunteer reading program received a half-hour in paid time off.

At the beginning of the 2000–2001 academic year, 19 percent of the students were reading at grade level. By May 2002, 42 percent were reading at grade level. Although the success of the program cannot be attributed solely to the involvement of the tutors, discussions with participating teachers have confirmed the importance of reading aloud with children and the value of tutors as role models who boost the children’s interest in reading.

Lessons Learned

For city employees, the experience could be rewarding, although a few found it difficult to find the one hour per week to spend at school. Several employees “job-shared” the tutoring with another employee, each worker reading with the children every other week. This practice enhanced employee flexibility while ensuring consistency for the students.

It was generally more difficult for field employees to participate in the program than for office or administrative staff. A streets-division equipment operator, for example, could not easily stop work for an hour to tutor while the rest of the crew stood by. Police and fire employees, however, were able to “job-share,” thus enabling their participation.

Employees liked to receive feedback on the students’ progress through periodic reading evaluations, not as a tool to help themselves as tutors in evaluating the children but as a way to encourage the readers. Most tutors formed a positive bond with the children and enjoyed watching the students progress throughout the year. Seeing the formal progress reports has reinforced the anecdotal evidence.

Internal marketing was required to recruit employees to participate. It was too easy not to seriously consider signing up when busy workloads were the norm. Job sharing with another employee, or allowing employees to commit themselves to a semester rather than to the full academic year, were two techniques that made it easier for some employees to participate.

Support for the program had to come from the top. In Ogden, elected officials fully supported—and still support—the employees and actively recruited the other four participating organizations. At the end of each academic year, the city hosts an ice-cream celebration for all tutors and school representatives.

Why Support a Similar Program in Your Community?

One-on-one tutoring time with an adult is vital to improving a child's reading skills. "We can affect the lives of more children, more deeply, for a longer period of time, at less cost, by teaching them to read well by third grade than by any other single thing we can do in our school systems," says Kathleen Daily of the Kennewick (Washington) School Board. The impact on the children is immediate, measurable, and long-term.

Implementing a program does not require new staff. This kind of program relies on volunteers and existing staff. It requires the agency and school to spend time coordinating the program, although experience in Ogden indicates that less than two hours per week of administrative time are required from each participating agency.

This program is local and decentralized. Elementary schools work directly with the local staff of a local government to coordinate the program. It is easy to start and maintain. Long lead times (while policies, procedures, and resources are put in place) are not needed. Participating agencies are not trying to change the school system but to integrate this program into existing reading programs.

Local governments can partner with and encourage other agencies and private enterprises to adopt similar programs, thus helping a greater number of readers in each community.

The program is easily replicated. Local elementary schools are readily accessible to thousands of local government employees. This idea will not only succeed under special circumstances—extraordinary leaders, nurturing sponsors, special funding or staffing—but also in a less protected setting, under the direction of ordinary people and with fewer resources.

As local government professionals, we have a direct stake in the long-term health of our communities, including that of its future leaders, voters, and taxpayers. Reading is a prerequisite for most employment, as well as for personal fulfillment and continued democracy. We have an opportunity to affect the future in a convenient but profound way. Why not contact your local elementary school principal today?

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