

Springfield, Massachusetts Reading Success by Fourth Grade

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As the Springfield, Massachusetts, native Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) wrote in his book *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut*, “The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn, the more places you’ll go!” (p. 27). In Springfield, we are marshaling the strengths of our community and our families to make sure every one of our children will have that opportunity.

The Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation began the Cherish Every Child Initiative (CHECH) in 1999 as a call to action for Springfield to promote both a rewarding childhood and promising future for all of its children. CHECH focused on increasing access to high-quality early education, a significant challenge in a city where only half of children attend preschool. The initiative convened stakeholders from many sectors to work collaboratively to ensure that all children, from birth, have a solid foundation that prepares them for success. This work stemmed from the belief that nurturing the hearts, souls, and minds of our children is critical to the future health and well-being of our community and that healthy child development is the foundation for long-term and sustainable economic prosperity.

In 2010, after startling statistics revealed that almost 66 percent of Springfield third graders were not reading proficiently, the Davis Foundation launched the Reading Success by 4th Grade (RS4G) public awareness campaign. Following the launch of the campaign, the foundation convened an Early Literacy Advisory Committee of leaders from early childhood education, public schools, higher education, community-based organizations, and government who together tackled this question: “What can we do as a community to move the needle on third-grade reading proficiency?”

This article was adapted from Springfield’s community solutions action plan submitted to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and the National Civic League as part of the selection process for the All-America City Awards last year. Springfield was one of fourteen communities named All-America Cities in July of 2012.

The committee recognized immediately that literacy skill development begins in infancy. Families and communities play critical roles in ensuring that children enter school ready to learn and continue to progress in their elementary years. The message of the committee is that to move the needle on early reading proficiency in Springfield, we must do much more than support schools to meet this challenge; we must also inform, encourage, and equip families and communities to support children’s literacy skill development. The theme chosen by the committee to organize its work—and to serve as the core message of the RS4G public awareness campaign—reflects this approach: To become a successful reader by fourth grade, every Springfield child needs support from family, school, and community.

In June 2010, the Early Literacy Advisory Committee’s work was released in a report that has become the community’s guide: *Reading Success by 4th Grade: Blueprint for Springfield*. The blueprint calls for Springfield to come together behind a goal of 80 percent of children reading proficiently by the end of third grade by 2016.

Background

Like many other northern industrial cities, Springfield has experienced a dramatic demographic change over the past several decades. For one thing, poverty rates increased, particularly child poverty. According to the 2010 census, there are 22,453 children age nine and under in Springfield, representing 14.7 percent of the total population. About 56.5 percent (12,691) of Springfield children under age nine are Latino; 25.4 percent are Black (5,710); 14.9 percent are White (3,352); and the remaining children are of Asian and other ethnicities. Springfield’s child poverty rate is 40 percent (versus 14.3 percent statewide and 21.6 percent nationally); for children under five, it is 48.1 percent (versus 17 percent statewide and 24.8 percent nationally). The effects of childhood poverty are pervasive and

long lasting. Many low-income children experience food and shelter instability, social/emotional challenges caused by stress and trauma, difficulty in accessing adequate preventive health care, and unsafe home and neighborhood environments. Research shows that children growing up in low-income environments face daunting challenges to building early literacy skills, relative to their economically well-off peers. In addition to shouldering a host of stressful problems, low-income children often miss out on the literacy-rich home environment that boosts the cognitive skills of middle and upper-income children. All these factors contribute to low-income children's struggles to achieve academically when they reach school age and to successfully grow into adults who participate fully in the labor market and civic life.

Several other demographic indicators illustrate Springfield's challenges:

- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, median household income in 2010 was \$35,236 (versus \$62,072 in Massachusetts and \$50,046 nationally).
- According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Springfield has the highest rate of births to single mothers in the state. Almost 69 percent of all births in Springfield in 2007 were to single mothers, compared to 32.2 percent for Massachusetts.
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010, 31 percent (4,922) of all single female heads of households in Springfield did not have a high school degree. This is six times the state rate, and research indicates that the greatest predictors of child academic success are the educational level of a child's mother and the socioeconomic level of the home.
- According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the teen birth rate in Springfield is four times the state average. Each year, about 2,535 babies are born in Springfield, with about 20 percent (512) of mothers under twenty years old (2007 data).
- About 38 percent of babies were born to mothers who had inadequate prenatal care in 2007, the third worst rate in the state.
- Since 2001, the Springfield Public Schools (SPS) population has experienced growth in:

- Low income (82.5 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch versus 34.2 percent of state)
- First language not English (24.9 percent of the student body does not speak English as a first language versus 16.3 percent of state)
- Special education (19.8 percent of students qualify for special education versus 17 percent of state)

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High School Graduation

The 2010 four-year cohort graduation rate in Springfield was 53 percent versus 82 percent for the state. Among students with disabilities, the rate was 33.5 percent versus 64 percent statewide. Among English-language learners, the rate was 39.2 percent versus 57.8 percent statewide. Since 2006, when the four-year cohort graduation rate was 51.4 percent, the rate has been trending up slightly, reaching to 54.5 percent in 2009 before dipping back to 53 percent in 2010.

In February 2011, the school district commissioned a segmentation study of dropouts by Robert Bal-fanz and Vaughn Byrnes of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University. The study, analyzing the educational experiences of young people who dropped out of SPS in 2008–2009, found that a large percentage of dropouts were “signaling” their intent to drop out during the preceding three school years.

The study pointed out these details about Springfield dropouts:

- They were disproportionately male.
- 65 percent were over-age for their grade level.
- 31 percent were eighteen or older.
- 61 percent were Hispanic/Latino (versus 55 percent Hispanic/Latino in the overall Springfield Public Schools student population).
- Over half were low income.

- Two-thirds were repeating the same grade they had been enrolled in for 2007–2008.
- Only 3 percent were new to the Massachusetts public education system, and only 5 percent were new to the Springfield school district.
- 87 percent had attendance under 90 percent during the year prior to dropping out.
- Course failure has been a routine experience for a high percentage of Springfield’s dropouts for several years prior to actually dropping out.

The study pointed out that given the students’ demographic profile and history of school failure, returning to a traditional high school would not be appropriate for a large segment of the Springfield school district’s dropout population.

Grade-Level Reading Proficiency

On the third-grade English Language Arts Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in 2011, 40 percent of children scored proficient or higher, up from 32 percent in 2008. The percentage in the “warning” category has fallen from 26 percent in 2008 to 18 percent in 2011. The fourth-grade English language arts scores have been flat since 2008, with 28 percent of children scoring proficient or higher in 2011 compared to 27 percent in 2008. The percentage in the “warning” category for fourth graders has stayed consistent between 26 percent and 28 percent since 2008.

Massachusetts defines its worst-performing 4 percent of schools statewide as “Level 4 schools.” According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, a Level 4 school is an underperforming school—both low performing on the MCAS and not showing signs of substantial improvement over that time. Ten of the forty Level 4 schools statewide are in Springfield, including five elementary schools: Brightwood, Elias Brookings, Gerena, Homer Street, and White Street, and one K–8 school, Alfred G. Zanetti. Third-grade reading proficiency ranged from 9 percent to 52 percent in these schools in 2011.

School Readiness

The rates at which Springfield’s children attend high-quality early education programs are far below the

statewide average. According to a 2008 parent survey, only half of Springfield’s three- to five-year-olds are enrolled in formal early education, compared to 70 percent of three- to five-year-olds statewide.

Of entering kindergartners in September 2009 (the most recent data available from the district), the majority was at risk according to the Springfield Public Schools Kindergarten assessment, which focuses on skill areas important for kindergarten literacy:

- 51 percent had inadequate knowledge of print concepts.
- 57 percent had inadequate knowledge of letter naming.
- 82 percent had inadequate knowledge of consonant letter sounds.
- 78 percent had inadequate knowledge of rhyming and initial sounds.

The 2009 data are not significantly different from data from the previous few years.

Student Attendance

In the last three years, the public schools have seen a significant drop in the percentage of kindergarten to fifth graders who are chronically absent. The percentage of kindergartners who were chronically absent dropped from 28 percent in 2009–2010 to 14 percent in 2010–2011. First graders experienced a similar drop in chronic absence over the same time period: 22 percent to 14 percent. Additionally, the overall district average daily attendance rate rose from 89.4 percent in 2007–2008 to 90.8 percent in 2010–2011.

These gains have resulted from the implementation of the district-wide Attendance Improvement Initiative beginning in the 2009–2010 school year. Significant work is taking place in each school, beginning with an articulated process of communication with parents that happens when the child has his or her first unexcused absence. Additionally, each principal has an attendance performance goal that is tied to annual evaluations and raises. There is a real awareness among principals at the elementary level that children’s attendance patterns begin in early grades, so they take active steps to increase attendance levels for their children.

Public school educators are encouraged by these gains but still are not satisfied with student attendance. The District Attendance Tracking Tool data shows that in kindergarten to fifth grade, an average of 13 percent of students have chronic or severe chronic absence, and another 11 percent have at-risk attendance. The tracking tool does not show significant differences in attendance patterns among grade levels, racial/ethnic groups, gender, English-language learners, or students with individualized education plans over the past three years, and there is significant variation among chronic absence levels among individual schools. For example, 28 percent of students at the Brightwood Elementary are chronically absent. At another six schools, 17 percent or higher of the student population are chronically absent; yet eleven schools have 10 percent or fewer of their students chronically absent.

Summer Learning (Summer School/Program Participation)

Springfield has no universal data on children's summer school or summer program participation, although we do have data from the public schools and from the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative, which provides scholarship resources, literacy skills development, and quality improvement resources to twenty-three programs in Springfield. Programs participating in the initiative served 2,300 children, and district-sponsored summer learning programs enrolled 2,720 in 2011 (although 63 percent, or 1,720, of the students in district-sponsored programs participated in half-day, month-long remedial programs).

A landscape mapping effort completed by the WestMOST Coalition and encompassing nonprofit providers and SPS summer school in 2009 found:

- 2,942 elementary school-age summer program slots in the city versus 11,561 elementary school students in SPS (25 percent)
- 1,273 middle school-age summer program slots versus 6,224 middle school students (20 percent)
- 1,923 high school-age summer program slots versus 6,994 high school students (27 percent)

When the Talk/Read/Succeed program participants completed a needs assessment in summer 2010, only

about 20 percent of the children were enrolled in summer programs of any kind.

Reading Success by Fourth Grade Initiative

Launched in June of 2010, the Reading Success by Fourth Grade Initiative is implementing a broad mix of strategies to reach its goal of 80 percent of third graders reading proficiently by 2016. Our initiative is directly aligned with the overall recommendations of a 2010 report by Dr. Nonie Lesaux of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success*. The report emphasizes the necessity of increasing the quality of children's language and reading environments across the many settings in which they are growing up. To do this, we have organized our strategies in three key focus areas of families, schools, and communities. Within each area, we are building capacity for optimal and ongoing supports for young children's literacy skill development.

Families

RS4G is providing new opportunities for parents of children 0–5 to learn how to support their children's early literacy skill development. We are reaching parents where they are by integrating information about child development and emerging literacy skills into families' everyday lives. *Turning the Page* recommends creating "partnerships with families focused on language & learning." Specific RS4G efforts include:

Reach Out and Read: Springfield has become a Reach Out and Read Bookend Community—the largest in the U.S., which means that all pediatric practices in the City of Springfield use the Reach Out and Read model and give books to children as part of their regular well-child visit.

Ready! for Kindergarten: RS4G supports the Springfield Early Care and Education Partnership to implement this research-based, developmentally appropriate parenting education curriculum. Three times per year, interactive workshops are given for parents/guardians of children, for each year from birth to five years of age, to help build their capacity to understand children's developmental milestones and nurture emerging literacy skills. Workshops are

held in places where families are comfortable, such as community centers and libraries, to ensure that parents/guardians participate in all three workshops each year, as the curriculum content is cumulative and appropriate for the child's growth and development across the domains. More than sixty families participated in our first year of implementation.

Talk/Read/Succeed: In July 2010, RS4G, SPS, the United Way of Hampden County, the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, the Springfield Housing Authority, the Springfield Collaboration for Change, and Partners for a Healthier Community launched a pilot project bringing together family, school, and community efforts on behalf of Springfield's low-income families living within two public housing developments. The Talk/Read/Succeed (T/R/S) project, with major support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, is a place-based holistic program serving 145 families with children nine and under with four major goals: improve parent involvement; improve access to early education and smooth transition to kindergarten; improve access to out-of-school time programs; and improve family stability, self-sufficiency, and health. From the program's latest grant report: "Talk/Read/Succeed has given our community the opportunity to ask isolated families in housing authority sites what they need to help their children succeed, respond to those needs with a series of evidence-based interventions together in one place and put in place the metrics to measure the outcomes for children and families. We are truly bringing the human and programmatic resources of the community together for collective impact on improving reading proficiency for children and supporting their families to do so as well."

Springfield Parent Academy: Launched in 2010 by school district, the Springfield Parent Academy is a community-based network of family learning opportunities that comprises offerings from the Springfield Public Schools, other educational institutions, community organizations, and local businesses. During the 2010–2011 school year approximately 1,100 people attended either a formal course offering of the academy or participated in an academy-sponsored informational session (on a variety of topics). To date, eighty-eight different courses or workshops have been provided by the academy,

including classes designed for parents of children below age five; helping parents assist their children/students; literacy-based offerings; and classes in languages other than English.

Public School Efforts

Over the past two years, Springfield Public Schools, in partnership with RS4G, has undertaken multiple new strategies to improve early literacy skills development and increase the percentage of third graders who score proficient or above on the statewide English language arts assessment. It is the first public school system in the state to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the state Department of Early Education and Care to promote pre-K–3 alignment, building on its history of collaboration with private early education and care providers. The goal is to create a comprehensive high-quality pre-K–3 education system, with pre-K delivered through a mixed system that includes public schools, for- and non-profit providers, and Head Start. The memorandum outlines numerous collaborative activities centered on sharing information; tracking student progress; engaging parents, pediatricians, and libraries; and sharing professional development opportunities in curriculum and assessment. Through the memorandum, the district and early education providers have created Professional Learning Communities—neighborhood-based partnerships between schools with pre-K classrooms and private early care and education settings.

Across all elementary schools, the district has focused on improving the quality of literacy teaching and learning and ensuring that the needs of individual children are met. Strategies include:

- A successful research-driven teacher professional development partnership with Cornerstone Literacy to improve student literacy and thinking skills which is being expanded to all thirty-two elementary schools.
- Instructional leadership specialists in literacy have been placed in all elementary schools.
- Continued use of the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmarking Assessment to determine independent and instructional reading levels and connect assessment to instruction from kindergarten through fifth grade

- A new elementary reading series and an instructional focus around reading comprehension have been adopted throughout the district.

Teachers trained in reading recovery and literacy intervention have been placed in a majority of elementary schools as the result of a partnership with Ohio State University and Lesley University. In addition, the district reorganized its academic leadership structure to create a district literacy team. The team is working with Dr. Nonie Lesaux of the Harvard Graduate School of Education to improve literacy instruction and student reading outcomes. Lesaux is providing coaching and research-based support on curricular and capacity-building initiatives. SPS's Level 4 elementary schools all are implementing comprehensive turnaround plans, with significant district and state direction and support.

Community Activity

We want all sectors of our community to be aware of, align with, and intentionally support children's early literacy development, so that wherever children and their families go outside of school and home—whether it is child care, preschool, library, store, community center, place of worship, after-school program, summer camp, pediatrician's office, or museum—they are immersed in literacy-rich environments. Since the initiative's launch, media and public awareness strategies have been intentionally directed to all Springfield markets, including English and Spanish language print and media. RS4G has disseminated more than 18,000 English/Spanish documents through early childhood providers, the Springfield City Library, book giveaways and community events, neighborhood health centers, Welcome to Kindergarten bags, the T/R/S project, the BOOK IT bookshelf program, Springfield Business Leaders for Education events, community action program sites, and various print and media outlets. In addition, the Harold Grinspoon Charitable Foundation is giving books to children in public and Head Start preschool classrooms that are used as part of the research-based OWL curriculum; in addition, the foundation enrolls children in many of the city's early care and education centers to receive books through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library Program.

RS4G supports Square One, an early childhood education provider, to administer the BOOK IT program, a model based on one developed and successfully implemented by the Family Reading Partnership in Ithaca, New York. The BOOK IT program places bookshelves in places where families go, keeps them stocked with children's books, and encourages children to take a book to own. The program serves as a visual reminder that reading should be a part of the everyday life of families and encourages parents and children to embrace and enjoy reading together. Eighteen bookshelves are currently in place in early childhood centers, housing authority sites, juvenile and family court waiting rooms, state agency waiting rooms, and other locations in the community where families go, and 255 books per week are taken from each bookshelf. The program has grown, in one short year, from 6,000 books to 22,000 books, with some of the books also supporting other family programs.

RS4G also supports Links to Libraries, a program that supplies books to children, families, classroom libraries, and homeless families, and also Welcome to Kindergarten book bags for all entering kindergarteners in Springfield. The book bags contain RS4G messaging materials and bookmarks, in English and Spanish as appropriate, for parents and caregivers to spread the message of the importance of reading and sharing/telling stories together to the development of children's oral language skills.

RS4G has helped to support the convening of an Early Literacy Coalition, a loosely formed collaboration of programs that target the development of children's early literacy skills. For more than a year, organizations including the City Library, WGBY—Public Television for Western New England, the state-funded early childhood education professional development entity, early childhood centers, and Head Start have met with a goal of working in alignment on events and programs targeted at Springfield's young children and their families. RS4G is improving the quality of Springfield's early childhood education programs by supporting scholarships for early childhood educators, early educator professional development, and center-based efforts toward accreditation and advancement in the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System.

In 2010, RS4G launched the innovative Family Child Care project to guide English- and Spanish-speaking family child care providers in better supporting the emerging literacy skills of the children in their care—and teaching their families to also do so. Sixty child care providers have participated in the intensive six-week/four-hour-per-week program, reporting that they have changed their teaching practices around early literacy as a result of their experience.

Faith-Based Curriculum

Since its inception, RS4G has reached out to the local faith-based community. Many places of worship are eager to engage their congregations in literacy-rich activities and to promote awareness of the importance of early childhood literacy skill development. RS4G has worked with an early literacy/reading expert who volunteered to create and implement a curriculum for use by faith leaders with their congregants that emphasizes Six Steps You Can Take to Enhance the Language and Literacy of Children in Springfield, including:

1. Engaging children in rich conversation.
2. Playing with language.
3. Singing.
4. Telling stories.
5. Reading to children and listening to children read.
6. Writing with children.

RS4G is piloting this effort with a few faith-based organizations. The curricula will be matched with book and literacy activity giveaways.

Advancing Summer Learning

The Springfield Public Schools have made significant efforts in recent years to provide access to high-need students to summer programming.

Children participating in the six-week Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) summer program in 2011 achieved an average of 9.9 months of grade-equivalent reading gains and 7.8 months of grade-equivalent math gains. Eighty percent of students had increased self-confidence, and 87 percent of par-

ents were satisfied with the program. The Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative is a past recipient of the Summer of Excellence National Summer Learning Association award. Each summer since 2006, the initiative has refined and deepened its focus on literacy interventions, increasing research-based program planning and curricula and staff coaching and training. The initiative's support results in children spending more time on texts that engage them and in project-based literacy skills development strategies that are integrated into the typical summer day.

In 2011, 68 percent of 2,300 children in thirty-nine programs advanced or maintained reading scores. The programs put in place a solid foundation in quality, and staff and children reported high levels of enjoyment and engagement. In addition, reading fluency increased by 3.27 words per minute; 72 percent of children assessed with Fountas and Pinnell gained by one, two, or three levels; and 83 percent of sites showed an increase in scores. The initiative also hires a significant number of Springfield Public School teachers as literacy experts, enabling them to spend the summer immersed in project-based learning and bring back to the classroom in the fall ideas to enhance the curriculum and teaching practices.

In addition, as part of Talk/Read/Succeed, in 2011, new summer programs were planned and implemented at each school site with space for a total of ninety children—thirty children entering kindergarten in the fall and sixty children entering grades 1 to 4. The Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative worked to ensure that the sites delivered high-quality, literacy-rich experiential learning opportunities. Children were tested before and after participation, and preliminary outcomes indicate that the majority made reading progress.

WGBY's implementation of the Bark About Books summer reading campaign served 225 children and their families with books, literacy activities, and family resources to prevent the summer reading slide. In addition, WGBY's Rising Readers program gives every Springfield exiting kindergartner a book bag filled with books and literacy activities and follows up with three to four mailings containing activities connected to the books over the summer.

Policy Development and Advocacy

RS4G engages in and supports public policy and advocacy to achieve increases in state and federal funding and sound policy frameworks that prioritize children's achievement of reading proficiency by the end of third grade. RS4G supports the Strategies for Children/Early Education for All Campaign, which is now focusing on reading proficiency by the end of third grade.

An important component of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation–funded T/R/S program is strategic development of a public policy agenda at the local, state, and federal levels. The T/R/S Policy Council was created to learn from the project's on-the-ground implementation, guide T/R/S policy activities, and connect the project to statewide policy and advocacy efforts. The work of the council is also intended to inform the work of the broader RS4G initiative. Through this process, members of the policy council—all local practitioners and program managers with a mixed range of policy and advocacy experience—are evolving into a unified coalition of advocates for children. Initial evaluation findings indicate that council members understand community needs and are developing a general understanding of the role that policy advocacy and awareness efforts can play in addressing those needs. Although it is a work in progress, members also better appreciate the role that the council can play as a forum through which members can articulate their individual perspectives, learn from one another, and help to achieve broader outcomes for the children and families of T/R/S. They have used data and research to identify policy priorities and discussed critical leverage points for impacting policy change.

Student Attendance Efforts

Springfield Public Schools began the Attendance Improvement Initiative in 2009–2010. At the elementary level, schools follow a structured protocol when a child is absent beginning with the first day of unexcused absence and continuing through thirteen unexcused absences and beyond. The protocol includes a mix of strategies including phone calls and home visits, referrals to community agencies, letters of concern and warning, and ultimately referrals to the courts and the state Department of Children and Families. In addition, schools

have implemented attendance incentive and reward programs.

Level 4 schools are partnering with City Connects, an innovative school-based intervention that revitalizes student support in elementary schools. City Connects, formerly Boston Connects, collaborates with teachers to identify the strengths and needs of every child and then creates a uniquely tailored set of intervention, prevention, and enrichment services located in the community designed to help each student learn and thrive. This individualized attention to meeting the nonacademic needs of students and families should help remove obstacles that are preventing families from successfully getting their children to school every day.

An additional initiative is the Walking School Bus. Piloted at the Brightwood School, where 75 percent of the student population walks to school each day and where 30 percent of kindergartners and 28 percent of first graders are chronically absent, the Walking School Bus taps Parent Ambassadors to lead groups of families and children to walk to and from school every day. Its advantages include increasing physical activity for the children, creating a safe passage to school, reducing absenteeism and tardiness, and building community engagement. Research by Damian A. Collins and Robin A. Kearns from the University of Auckland shows that particularly for new immigrants, a Walking School Bus can create community cohesion and provide parents with an opportunity to socialize with other parents and develop a relationship with the school. The Walking School Bus strategy has excellent replication potential and carries minimal cost. RS4G's T/R/S initiative has helped to create a Walking School Bus for the Dorman School focused on the Robinson Gardens housing development and is currently developing a Walking School Bus with its other partner, Boland School.

Coordinated Activities, Programs, and Initiatives

June 2012 will mark two years since the release of the *Blueprint*. In its first two years, the initiative began multiple efforts, following the *Blueprint* recommendations, toward meeting its goal of 80 percent of Springfield children reading proficiently by the end

of third grade by 2016. Moving forward, we will continue this diverse set of activities while maintaining flexibility to implement midcourse corrections as we learn more about the changing needs of Springfield's young families.

Our existing strategies are broadly designed to provide support and interventions that catalyze early literacy skill development in at-risk children from birth through fourth grade in school, at home, and throughout the community. Through this lens we have had an existing focus on school readiness and its fundamental connection to grade-level reading success. Summer learning has also been a component—although not yet a major focus—of our work.

School Readiness/Grade-Level Reading

As we analyze the impact of our existing work, we will consider replication of the T/R/S program in an additional neighborhood, potentially Mason Square. Mason Square is one of the highest-need neighborhoods in Springfield and is the focus of Springfield's Promise Neighborhood planning. (Although Springfield was not chosen for a Promise Neighborhood planning grant, efforts to create a Promise Neighborhood in Mason Square are continuing.)

In 2011, RS4G contracted with Market Street Research to discover attitudes toward early literacy among Latino families. The program will use it to design effective multimedia Spanish-language outreach on early literacy targeting Latino families.

The *Blueprint* also pointed out the lack of a infrastructure for recruiting, training, placing, and supporting literacy-focused volunteers in a range of environments. The Community Subcommittee recommends that RS4G take the lead in exploring systemic and cost-effective strategies to ensure that volunteers focused on literacy receive high-quality training, are matched with the appropriate placement, and are given ongoing support in their efforts to help develop children's literacy skills.

In 2012, Springfield College launched a Student Success AmeriCorps to support the academic success and the behavioral and physical health of Springfield

students. Corp members serve as academic coaches, school counselors, and literacy coaches for pre-kindergarten and secondary school students. Members' service will remediate risk factors for dropping out, including poor early literacy skills, low attendance, behavioral problems, and failure in core courses.

Two areas where we have a strong track record and will continue to devote substantial attention are educating parents and guardians about their role in supporting early literacy skill development (through Ready! For Kindergarten and other efforts) and increasing the skills of educators teaching children in the preschool to fourth grade to boost early literacy skills (through supporting quality improvement for early education providers and literacy strategies for the Springfield Public Schools).

These focus areas are also emphasized in the *Turning the Page* report. A new initiative spearheaded by WGBY Public Television for Western New England and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting focuses on a neighborhood-based strategy for addressing these priorities. Ready to Learn: North End aims to convey the importance of early learning, provide accessibility to technology, and build parent and educator comfort with early literacy and math skills for children ages three to eight. Specific strategies of Ready to Learn: North End include:

- Sponsoring educator/parent Workshops
- Creating a North End Center for Literacy and Learning (NECLL) inside the Gerena Community School (a Level 4 school)
- Establishing a Mobile Transmedia Lab
- Working with a coalition of youth to serve as digital ambassadors to the North End community
- Conducting robust neighborhood outreach

WGBY will share the story of this project (on-air, online, face-to-face) with the Springfield community.

Current partners include the Springfield Public Schools with a focus on Gerena, Lincoln, and Brightwood; the YMCA of Greater Springfield; Springfield Parks Department; Square One; Cherish Every Child/RS4G; North End Campus Coalition; the North End Outreach Network (NEON); Head Start;

the Springfield Parent Academy; and the Springfield City Library: Brightwood Branch.

Our work in implementing the memorandum of understanding (MOU) with early education and care will also expand. Since Massachusetts is an Early Learning Challenge Fund winner, we will have potential opportunities for additional support of this work. The professional learning communities—local partnerships across the city that include an elementary school and neighboring preschool providers, including Head Start programs—are engaged in instructional learning walks and other shared professional development and relationship-building activities. We hope to establish additional professional learning communities.

We will also expand our connection with faith-based communities. In addition to the early literacy workshops/curriculum, RS4G is developing a marketing piece targeted to faith-based communities which will offer a menu of opportunities that organizations can implement, including the workshops, the BOOK IT program, and a model for a faith-based mentoring program focusing on children from first to third grade.

Student Attendance

For student attendance, Springfield Public Schools will continue to implement the Attendance Improvement Initiative, which has shown significant results since its implementation in 2009–2010. We will also continue to closely analyze student data in collaboration with Springfield Public School leadership and to identify the key components of success for those schools that are showing a greater drop in chronic absenteeism than the district average. We will continue to engage parents in dialogue to uncover the key obstacles that prevent children in kindergarten to the fourth grade from attending school.

Summer Learning

As RS4G deepens its focus on summer learning, we will update our supply/demand landscape mapping last completed in 2009. This is necessary because although RS4G has supported the nationally renowned Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative as a key strategy since its inception and the Springfield

Public Schools have supported partnerships with providers such as BELL, neither of these efforts provides universal access or has information about access versus demand for Springfield’s at-risk children overall. T/R/S completed a survey of its target population in summer 2011 and found that 20 percent had access to summer programming before T/R/S intervention.

Once we have updated data, we will consider strategies to boost access for at-risk children. To increase quality—and, in particular, quality early literacy supports—the initiative will continue to play the lead role. The initiative will continue and expand its efforts to boost program quality by introducing and deepening universal literacy strategies, expanding children’s time on text, and broadening the range of children’s reading choices. In addition, the initiative aims to expand the involvement of families in promoting reading and literacy by involving families in literacy events, sending home literacy materials, and providing hands-on training for families; and to continue and enhance the utilization of coaches with teaching backgrounds and offer reading interventionists to each site to work with small groups of struggling readers.

The Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative will also continue its broader program quality improvement supports, including increasing the focus on adult-child relationships through more engaging and thought-provoking conversations and ensuring that programs provide youth more voice and choice in activities and more opportunities for youth leadership and problem solving, including more structured reflection time. Finally, the initiative will strengthen structural supports that make high quality possible, for example, by helping leaders design well-planned summer programs and recruit, train, and motivate their staff.

To more fully pinpoint the impact of the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative, program leaders will create a more robust evaluation, including using a more comprehensive literacy assessment tool and a control group; collecting information on program variables like staff qualifications, adult-child ratios, and differences in demographic variables; and further evaluate outcomes on engagement and motivation in learning.

Sustainability of Effort

Cherish Every Child was developed in a series of community conversations and meetings over a decade ago. The work on specific early childhood issues was accomplished as Cherish Every Child supported organizations to research best practices and develop models based on that research; issues included supporting early childhood educators to have access to college; home visits for mothers of newborns to give them support in early literacy; increasing access to overall health and mental health resources; and engaging in public policy and advocacy. The initiative maintained its momentum on early childhood issues led by a small steering committee and regularly convened a larger group, the Springfield Early Childhood Leaders. In the larger group, speakers who were experts on specific issues and updates from smaller issue groups were provided.

As the work refocused to RS4G, we have continued to convene the Springfield Early Childhood Leaders to spread the message of the importance of the third-grade reading milestone and have broadened the group's composition to include the business community and others with a stake or interest in early literacy. We have brought the campaign for grade-level reading to the attention of the Springfield Business Leaders for Education several times, including hosting Ralph Smith of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to talk to them about the nationwide movement. For many years, Cherish Every Child has taken groups of Springfield business leaders to national forums convened by the Partnership for America's Economic Success to hear the research on investment in early childhood education, as a way to develop advocates and champions, even bringing Nobel Laureate James Heckman to the city to keynote a gathering of 200-plus business and community leaders.

A small group of business leaders who attended the most recent national forum of the Partnership for America's Economic Success has a goal of developing a speakers' bureau to engage their peers in the on-the-ground work of sharing the message of the importance of the reading proficiency milestone and early childhood education.

As RS4G has evolved, one of our goals has been to modify the structure and membership of our

leadership groups to broaden the support for the community-wide initiative and continue to deeply engage the community's leaders. The opportunity to apply for the All-America City Award spurred us to convene a broad leadership group to develop this application. This group has agreed to continue in the leadership role and will serve as the think tank for moving forward and energizing the efforts needed to help Springfield's children all achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade.

Organizations participating in the Leadership Group include these:

- City of Springfield, Office of the Mayor
- City of Springfield, City Council
- City of Springfield, School Committee
- Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts
- Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation
- Department of Early Education and Care: Western Massachusetts Regional Director, Coordinated Family and Community Engagement Office
- Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative
- Partners for a Healthier Community
- Regional Employment Board of Hampden County
- Springfield Public Schools: Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer, Office of Data and Technology, Director of Literacy (pre-K–12), Parent Academy
- Springfield Business Leaders for Education
- Springfield City Library
- Springfield Housing Authority
- Springfield Museums
- Talk/Read/Succeed
- United Way of the Pioneer Valley
- WGBY, Public Television for Western New England

RS4G will continue to broaden this group as appropriate. A key constituent is city government, and we hope to better define the city's role in RS4G through this process. Going forward, the leadership group will meet monthly and develop its rules of engagement and continuing structure and interim metrics to support the goal of 80 percent of Springfield's children reading proficiently on the third grade MCAS by 2016.

Goals, Targets, and Milestones

RS4G has set a community-wide goal of 80 percent of third graders testing proficient or above on the English Language Arts MCAS by 2016. As outlined in our assurance to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, we will tap the emerging RS4G leadership group, with representation from all the major sectors, to address community-wide goal setting related to school readiness, summer learning, and student attendance.

Our goal-setting efforts related to school readiness will be tightly aligned to the work outlined in the commonwealth's winning Early Challenge Learning Fund proposal, which will include the development of the Massachusetts Kindergarten Entry Assessment. Springfield is one of twenty-two districts in the first cohort developing the common kindergarten entry assessment.

On summer learning, we will explore setting goals in several areas, including the percentage of Springfield's high-need children who have access to high-quality summer programs and also learning and development milestones achieved by children as a result of their participation in various types of summer learning programs. We will have to update our summer program demand/supply mapping data to ensure we have the most current information as a baseline before we consider what the appropriate access and achievement goals should be.

On student attendance, every school currently has an annual attendance goal related to its own current baseline. The attendance goals are included in principals' contracts, and a portion of their annual raise is dependent on meeting the attendance target.

Lessons Learned

Since RS4G's inception, we have gained significant momentum with the Springfield community in the recognition of the importance of the reading proficiency milestone and on the importance of collaboration to tackle a challenge that any one funder or entity cannot solve alone.

Performance gaps exist for all of the reasons listed:

- Too little attention to the solid research that we have on the importance of beginning at birth with the development of children's oral language and other developmental milestones
- Inadequate resources
- Insufficient coordination among the key stakeholders and actors

It would be very easy to say that we have inadequate resources to change the reading outcomes for our community's third graders. But as a result of our experience in building a community collaboration focused on grade-level reading, we are convinced that there *are* research-based programs and interventions that work. We cannot afford to invest our time and resources on programs that are not research based and evaluated. Our city's children cannot be the guinea pigs when their future is at stake.

What we know is that we must give parents and caregivers, who want the best for their children, information and access to the programs and resources they need to help their children succeed. RS4G's public awareness and engagement campaigns, targeted to places where parents/families go, are educating them about what research tells us needs to happen for their children, beginning at birth.

One important lesson we have learned from our W. K. Kellogg Foundation-funded Talk/Read/Succeed program is that many of our low-income families typically have themselves not had positive relationships with schools and that we must work hard to foster good relationships between parents and their children's school. Their children's difficulties may not be about poor reading skills but about the challenges they face and the supports they need. We know that reaching families with resources and supports is not easy, but it *is* the solution that will enable them ultimately to help their children on the path to academic and life success.

We are bringing the community's leaders together and asking them to collaborate on the important work toward the goal of reading proficiency by the end of third grade for every Springfield child, because the future economic vitality of our children,

families, and the community itself depends on working together. They are coming forward and supporting the goal with their time, talents, and resources, and together we can get it done.

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