

FOREWORDS

FROM RECENT CAMPAIGN FOR
GRADE-LEVEL READING PUBLICATIONS

MIDPOINT SNAPSHOTS

THE GLR CAMPAIGN'S 2020 GOAL:

- *A promising trend line and sustainable momentum toward closing the reading proficiency gap*
 - *A dozen states or more have increased by at least 100 percent the number of low-income children reading proficiently by the end of third grade*
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The snapshots in the pages that follow provide compelling testimony that time, talent and sweat equity can make a difference, especially when energized by strong leaders and supported by smart investors. Now 240 communities strong, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading can report progress on practically every measure that matters to its 2015 and 2016 milestones. Midway through the decade, we have good reason to be optimistic that what once seemed to some a daunting 2020 numerical goal is coming into sight and, seemingly, within reach. More than a dozen states are on course to increasing substantially the number of low-income children reading on grade level. Several of them will make it. Others will come close.

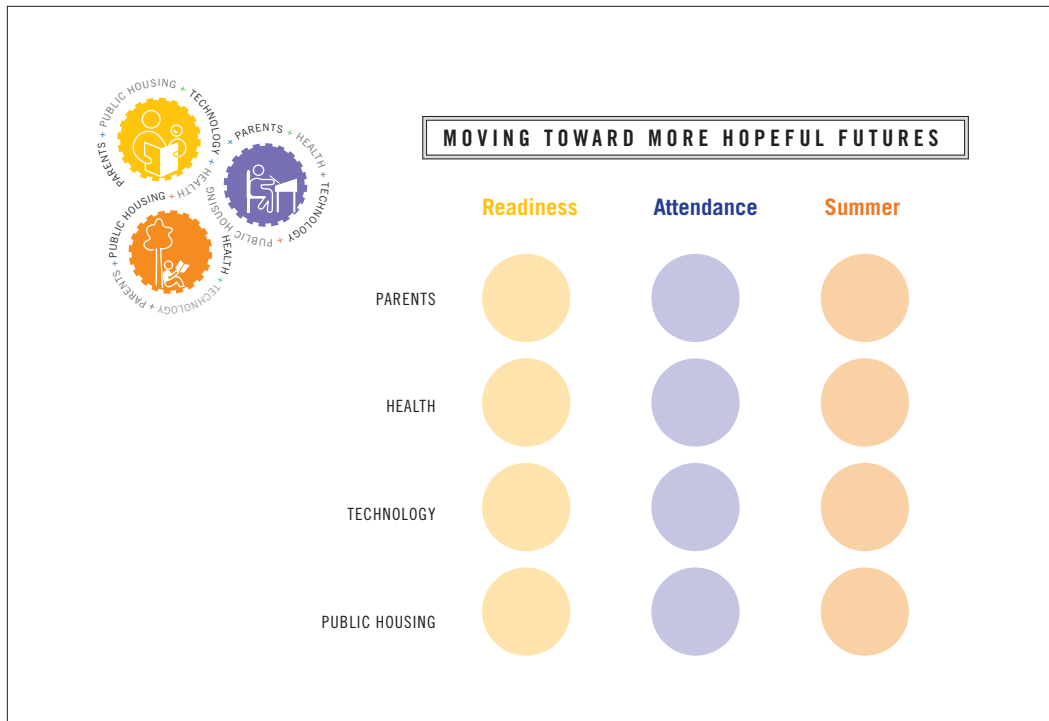
Having spent the past two decades steeped in a culture that honors constructive dissatisfaction as the fuel for continuous improvement, it is unsurprising that the GLR Campaign's senior leaders have spent more time interrogating our apparent successes than celebrating them. That inquiry-based process of learning and reflection has yielded several important insights and lessons.

- 1 Timing and tactics matter.** The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is the grateful beneficiary of heroic predecessors and fortuitous timing. Moreover, some in-course tactical tilts such as attaching to the consensus around high school graduation accelerated progress and expanded the proverbial big tent.
- 2 The “stake in the ground” approach combined with an enabling “can do” narrative is a powerful force for mobilizing action.** Although the twin propositions of the 2020 goal serve as bedrock for the GLR Campaign, it is the better-known numerical rendering that has become the North Star. From the Moonshot Moment in Florida's Indian River County to Turn the Page KC in Kansas City, Missouri, to Tahoe Truckee Reads in rural Northern California and so many communities in between, it has worked to have a number as the target. And in those communities as elsewhere, equipping civic leaders and public officials with the information, tools and supports to make the aspirations actionable has helped to spur broad-based support, engagement and civic action.

- 3 A common set of success factors is associated with the communities making the most progress.** The most prominent and consistent of these factors are a sense of shared ownership of the goal; joint accountability for its attainment; a focus on the most vulnerable children; improvised solutions to data-sharing challenges; a tilt toward investing time, attention and dollars in what's working; and an emerging acknowledgment that, like leadership, stewardship matters.
- 4 A set of well-recognized conditions operates to brake progress in even the most successful communities.** Even the most promising programs and initiatives find it difficult to fulfill their potential given the pervasive fragmentation, duplication of effort, proliferation of silos and challenge of gaining timely access to data needed for quality decision making. All this is especially debilitating for communities with little in the way of standing capacity and even less in the form of deployable resources.
- 5 Some early strategic decisions have paid off.** We were intentional about unbundling grade-level reading into “three assurances” — quality teaching, more seamless systems and community solutions; prioritizing community-owned solutions to advance school readiness, school attendance and summer learning; and betting big on the bottom-up approach represented by local community campaigns. The decision to focus primarily on what Denver’s Mayor Hancock terms the challenges “outside the school door” has broadened the big tent coalition to include constituencies historically averse to becoming enmeshed in public schools. At the same time, it has elicited strong endorsement from educators at all levels who appreciate the GLR Campaign’s consistent reminder that schools cannot not succeed alone. And as several states with multiple GLR communities are approaching the tipping point, our faith in local communities and the bottom-up bet are paying off.

Looking Forward

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading’s action plan for the second half of its decade-long run will seek to solidify and accelerate the progress promised by the proof point communities. As importantly, that action plan will recognize that we currently define and measure “progress” consistent with the better-known of the two challenges captured in the 2020 goal — that of moving the needle. The lesser-known and longer-term challenge focuses on closing the reading proficiency gap. At present, double-digit gaps persist and co-exist with good progress in every state and almost every GLR community. It seems reasonable to question whether the moving-the-needle approach to progress may be inadequate to the task of producing the desired “sustainable momentum” toward closing the reading proficiency gap.



Achieving reading proficiency requires aggregation and alignment of effort — across and between solutions and focus areas — for impact and scale.

More Hopeful Futures, the GLR Campaign initiative scheduled for formal launch in 2017, will encourage and support a “bigger outcomes” approach — increments of positive change large enough to move the needle *and* close the gap. In many ways, the “bigger outcomes” strategy will reflect the bingo matrix: doubling down on readiness, attendance and summer learning; lifting up parent success and healthy child development as critical determinants of early school success; prioritizing children and families in public housing; promoting systemic solutions to the data challenges; and employing technology to assist with all of the above.

Those programmatic elements will sit within a larger strategy built to reflect our bias toward both action and reflective practice, our insistence on back mapping, driving with data and forming coalitions of the willing. Moreover, the focus on “bigger outcomes” will bring additional strategic priorities:

- **Advocating for data-driven, technology-enhanced early warning and response systems** that will allow timely identification of and intervention with children who are veering off the pathways leading to readiness, attendance and summer learning.

MILESTONES

By the close of 2015:

- Improving third-grade reading proficiency, school readiness, attendance/chronic absence and summer learning for children from low-income families *will have emerged as priorities* for public officials and influential constituencies across the nation
- Early learning, healthy on-track development and successful parents will be *more widely recognized as essential contributors* to success in the early grades

By the close of 2016:

- Communities in the Grade-Level Reading Network *will serve as proof points* for improving school readiness, attendance/chronic absence, summer learning and reading proficiency in the early grades, with at least 100 communities showing progress in one of the areas and at least 50 communities in 15 states showing progress in at least two areas

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- **Unbundling readiness, attendance and summer learning** to allow more granular attention to the drivers of improved outcomes in each of these domains.
 - **Extending the collective impact framework** to accommodate and support solutions design and development processes that capture the stored value of the GLR Network's distributed strengths, experience and expertise.

“What crystallizes the moral imperative to act is the knowledge that acting could make a difference.” That admonition (learned from Jesuits and now credited to me by Google) should remind us that we have good reason to chart a path forward with a bias toward action. The 62 GLR communities recognized as Pacesetters since 2012 make a compelling case that, in this instance, action already is making a difference.

As you review the data in the pages that follow, hold close and take to heart another admonition that serves as fuel and guide: “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.” (Google still credits this to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.)

Ralph Smith

MANAGING DIRECTOR

TOWARD BIGGER OUTCOMES

TAKING ON THE HEALTH DETERMINANTS OF EARLY SCHOOL SUCCESS

THE MORAL IMPERATIVE TO ACT IS CRYSTALLIZED BY THE KNOWLEDGE
THAT ACTION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Almost 190 of the more than 300 communities participating in the Grade-Level Reading Communities Network are reporting progress toward at least one of the community solutions indicators: readiness, attendance and summer learning. These reports affirm a premise that undergirds many of the strategic choices of our Campaign for Grade-Level Reading: Once mobilized, the time, talent, energy and sweat equity present in local communities can make a meaningful difference in finding solutions for even the biggest problems. Furthermore, the number, detail and geographic distribution of those progress reports should serve as antidote to the paralyzing combination of cynicism, complacency and despair. For this reason alone, the progress reported is applause-worthy.

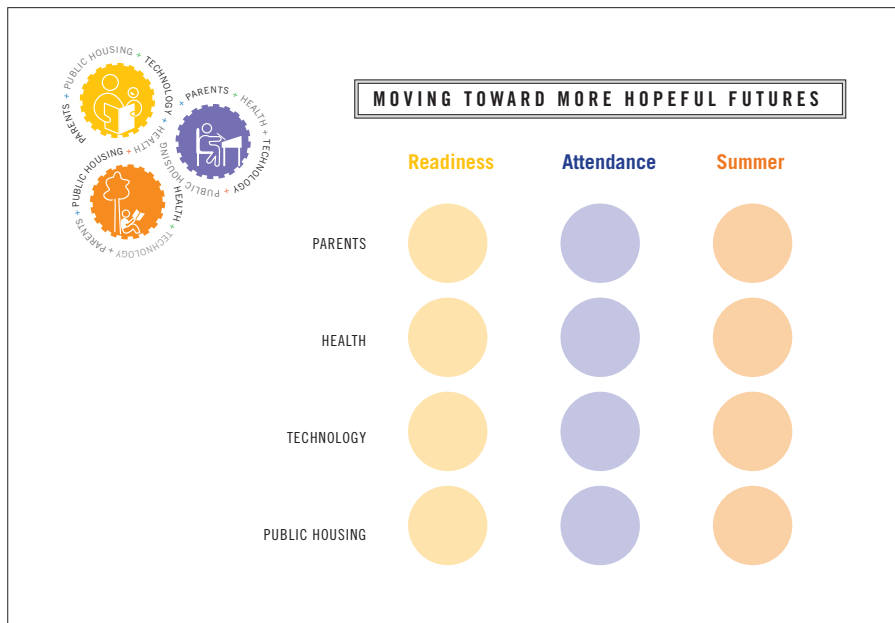
The applause morphs from celebration to exhortation when confronted by the distance between what it takes to “move the needle” and what is required to “close the gap” between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers. Double-digit gaps in reading proficiency persist and co-exist with good progress in every state and every GLR community, including those reporting the most progress. And it is this reality that drives our determination to pursue “bigger outcomes” for the next chapter of the GLR Campaign.

This more robust “bigger outcomes” strategy will build upon the successes we have to attain the results we want. “Bigger outcomes” will see us doubling down on readiness, attendance and summer learning; lifting up parent success and healthy child development as critical determinants of early school success; prioritizing children and families in public housing and vulnerable populations such as children in foster care; promoting systemic solutions to the data challenges; and employing technology and technology-enhanced platforms to assist with all of the above. We fully expect that each of these components will bring its own promise and pitfalls as we learn from and with the GLR communities and our partners as well as practitioners, researchers and experts.

And we are especially grateful to those local funders and leaders of exemplary programs who have raised their hands to join the learning and development expedition that is the forerunner to More Hopeful Futures, the next generation of the GLR Campaign’s proof points work. These funding and program partners are essential as we seek bigger outcomes through the “both/and” and “all of the above” approach captured by our bingo matrix.

“Doubling down,” “lifting up” and “prioritizing” are more recipe than menu — especially so regarding attention to parent success and healthy child development. Parents and caregivers are the first diagnosticians, first responders and first home health care providers. Moreover, their own health status and challenges are deeply intertwined with those of their children.

The myriad efforts of GLR communities to find, own and implement viable solutions to the readiness, attendance and summer learning challenges have illuminated how dependent all three are on the presence or absence of certain health conditions. The dependence is so





great that the health markers are literally as well as figuratively determinants of early learning, early literacy and school success, especially in the early grades. Foreshadowed by the extensive literature on the social determinants of health, the community-level efforts have exposed the contours of a vicious cycle. Subpar school outcomes are key predictors of low socioeconomic status. The resulting social conditions account for much of the most consequential health disparities. The deleterious effects of a number of these health disparities on virtually all aspects of early learning predict the diminished outcomes that complete and perpetuate the cycle.

Common sense, reflective practice, the wisdom of lived experience and the research literature offer support for our bet that the prospects for improving student outcomes in the early grades can be enhanced by improving healthy child development in the early years. We now understand more deeply that the double-bottom-line effects of this aspect of our work — honing in the health issues that are most closely correlated with early school success — could prove a powerful intervention for one of the vicious cycles that sustain and nourish the intergenerational poverty we hope to disrupt.

This could be a big deal with far-reaching implications. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, it is important to recall again the “no silver bullet” admonition. Our initiatives to “lift up” both parents and health will succeed best and contribute most when nested within a strategic context that is intentional about fostering the connectivity and synergies needed for sustainable scale.

Insofar as the health determinants of early school success are concerned, we see at least three major contributors to bigger outcomes and sustainable scale:

- Silo-busting “common enterprise networks” that create and reflect the vertical and horizontal alignment needed for joint planning, data sharing and “real time” feedback loops.
- Innovative fiscal tools to ensure access to predictable funding and the blending, braiding and leveraging of public resources, private investment and philanthropic dollars for impact.
- Durable leaders and institutions bringing dollars, local knowledge, earned credibility, influence and intellectual capital along with a commitment to serve as anchors and stewards of long-term change.

The focus on “bigger outcomes” will bring additional strategic priorities:

- Advocating for data-driven, technology-enhanced early warning and response systems that will allow timely identification of and intervention with children who are veering off the pathways leading to readiness, attendance and summer learning.
- Unbundling readiness, attendance and summer learning to allow more granular attention to the drivers of improved outcomes to accelerate scaling success by bundling proven and promising programs to enhance impact.
- Extending the collective impact framework to accommodate and support solutions design and development processes that capture the stored value of the GLR Network’s distributed strengths, experience and expertise.

In closing, it is important to note again that the single development of which we are most proud and most hopeful is that over 250 community foundations, family foundations, United Ways, public charities, corporate-giving programs and individual donors have stepped up to provide dollars, leadership and voice to early learning, early literacy and grade-level reading initiatives in their local communities and home states. And we have emerging evidence that some of these local funders are encouraging and inspiring institutions of higher education to channel their formidable reservoirs of intellectual, human and economic capital toward confronting the challenges associated with early school success. This is a development worth watching.

Ralph Smith

MANAGING DIRECTOR

TOWARD CLOSING THE GAP(S)

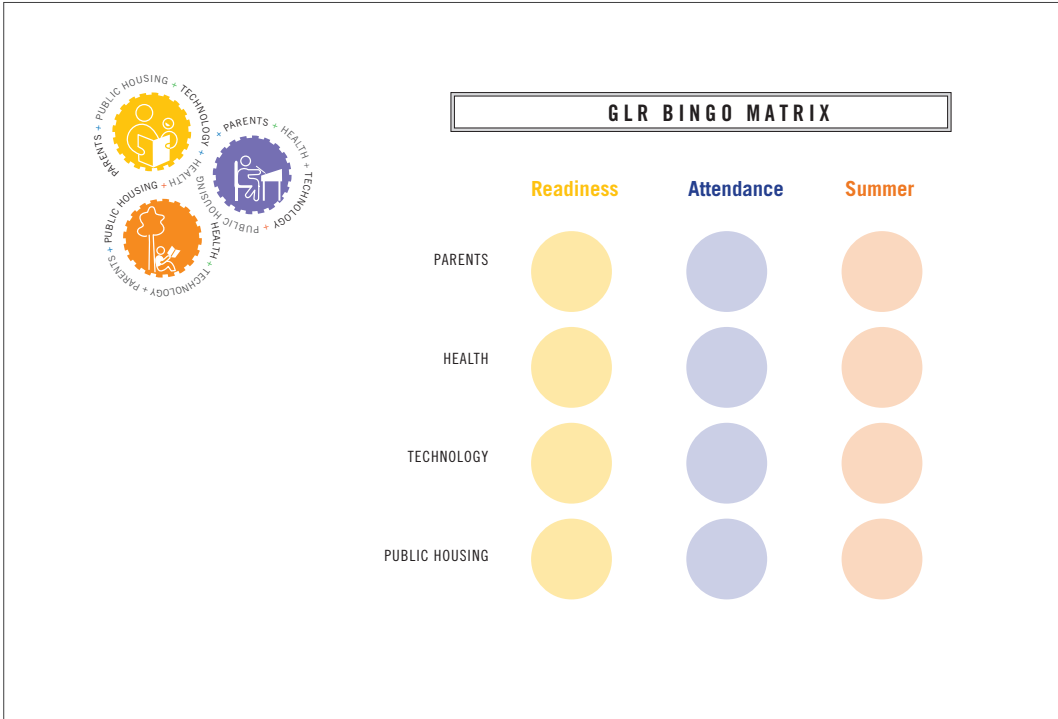
A LARGE AND GROWING NUMBER *of children are falling beyond the reach of schools. In a nation committed to opportunity and insistent that school-centered education is the pathway to success, that is a truth so inconvenient that it borders on heresy.*

The push toward bigger outcomes, announced as a self-critique and challenge for the GLR Campaign in 2016, has become a network-wide phenomenon. GLR Network communities across the country are doubling down on school readiness, attendance and summer learning by leveraging technology to facilitate parents' success and healthy child development as critical determinants of early school success. And they are lifting up and prioritizing key aspects of bigger outcomes. Parent success is becoming the portal through which to frame two-generation responses involving home and school in addressing the challenges of dual-language learners and children with learning differences, disabilities and attention issues. The commitment to take on the health determinants of early school success has drawn attention Network-wide to Medicaid reimbursements and the overall challenge of assuring sustainable financing. The focus on technology has moved past celebrating how text messaging and other social media can supply parents with tips, tools and appointment reminders; these days, the new frontier for many communities lies in tele-medicine's potential to increase the incidence and efficacy of developmental screening, oral health care and vision correction.

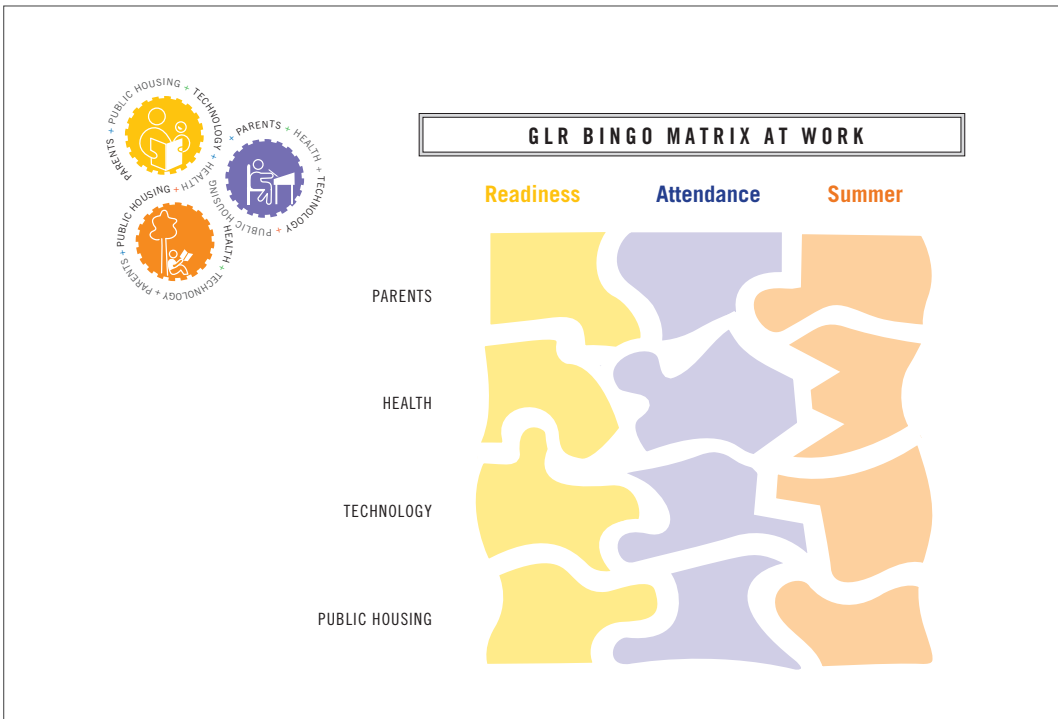
As importantly, there is a wonderful dynamic in which even small increments of progress instigate and fuel expanded efforts to keep taking the next step, even when that means transgressing boundaries and navigating unfamiliar terrain. Kindergarten readiness efforts are being broadened to include an explicit focus on social-emotional development. Initiatives to reduce chronic absence have generated willingness to explore trauma-informed practice and to recognize the significance of school climate. Turning the tables on summer learning loss has opened the door to new relationships with after-school programs and a deeper appreciation of expanded learning.

Partners in communities across the nation are contributing their fair share to this progress. Even the most cursory review of the self-assessments completed by 194 GLR Network communities reveal numerous examples of Head Start programs, WIC, public libraries and museums choosing to become stakeholders in the local campaigns. And, as with public libraries a few years ago,

Increasing the number of children achieving reading proficiency requires aggregation and alignment of effort — across and between solutions and focus areas — for impact and scale.



As the work proceeds, aligning to aggregate for impact will seem more like assembling a jigsaw puzzle.



public housing agencies are emerging as mission-critical partners. In dozens of communities around the country, the public housing agency's engagement has accelerated efforts to negotiate formal interagency data-sharing agreements among school districts, health centers and other agencies. This, in turn, is sparking quite serious conversations about how best to assure more seamless access by vulnerable families to necessary systems of care, services and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Among the most promising developments is the growing number of colleges and universities probing for engagement with local campaigns. Most of the ongoing conversations would be deemed exploratory. And both historic and contemporary "town and gown" issues promise significant challenges. Even so, our positive experience with the colleges and universities already playing important roles in the local grade-level reading campaigns suggests that this is a development to follow and encourage. The game-changing potential of access to the formidable array of assets (intellectual capital, human capital, economic capital) and capabilities of institutions of higher education qualifies this a "big bet" worth taking.

It's getting harder to close the reading proficiency gap.
Students in higher-income families are making gains at a
rate nearly twice that of students in low-income families.

Bigger outcomes are consistent with the GLR Campaign's insistence on goals that are simultaneously ambitious, achievable and actionable. The growing energy and engagement around bigger outcomes also represent a promising and timely trend, especially in light of two somber findings in Leila Fiester's Research Note and Working Paper (included toward the end of this monograph). Fiester first sets out data and research showing that increments of progress for low-income children are being outpaced by the progress of their more affluent peers. Closing, or even just narrowing, the reading achievement gap, while never an easy lift, is becoming even more daunting. The "doubling down/lifting up/prioritizing" initiatives now underway will need to persist, grow stronger and become more robust.

Close observers will note that the organic evolution of the work in GLR Network communities is accompanied by an intentional evolution of our messaging. While closing the reading proficiency gap clearly remains our objective, "early school success" has emerged as our preferred way to describe the goal. The reframing is intended to signal and support some of the tactical tilts being

adopted to pursue the more robust “bigger outcomes” effort. These will include efforts to build a bridge between the STEM and literacy movements, to broaden awareness of emerging science and to integrate tutoring and mentoring more fully.

Fiester’s second and even more sobering point comes with her conclusion and reminder of the widely asserted but generally ignored admonition about the “silver bullet.” Simply put, the research literature provides no credible evidence that any one of even the most exemplary and acclaimed programs is sufficiently powerful that it alone can close the gap.

Absorbing and then responding to this reality will require a strategic shift, not just tactical tilts. Efforts to align, stack and bundle promising and proven programs must move from the “good things to consider” bucket to the “urgent, must do.” The “do it all” admonition of the Bingo Matrix moved us to envision more collaborative approaches for harnessing the distributed strengths of the GLR Network to design, develop and then assemble the various components of parent success and healthy child development. Similarly, those strengths must be recruited to propel intentional efforts to pursue what must be seen as imperative — aggregating for impact and sustainable scale.

Imperative or not, persuading entrepreneurs leading relevant efforts in the social and private sectors to pursue larger-effect sizes through aggregation will prove no easier than moving those in public agencies. As veteran practitioners of collective impact initiatives have learned the hard

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Today, we still do not know of any single program that, on its own, is sufficiently powerful to close the reading proficiency gap by even one standard deviation, let alone two, at a population level — even over time, and even if fully scaled up.

way, deep collaboration unmask rough, jagged and sometimes sharp edges of differences in organizational culture, competing priorities, differential access to resources and leadership styles. In the crucible of practice, the Bingo Matrix shape-shifts and morphs into a jigsaw puzzle.

Our refreshed commitment is to assure more hopeful futures for this nation's low-income children by increasing their prospects for early school success as measured by reading proficiency at the end of third grade. This commitment allows space for strategic alliances with those for whom math proficiency and executive function seem equally important. That commitment will require pursuit of bigger outcomes, larger effects through collaborative design and development of workable solutions, and aggregating for impact and sustainable scale. And it will require a GLR Network that is stronger and even more resolute, fueled by state- and community-facing funders willing to raise their hands to encourage and support civic and community leaders, parents, providers and advocates. Urged on by the dozens of sector-leading organizations who have joined us, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading stands ready to continue its catalytic and backbone roles.

We are exceedingly grateful to those who have traveled with and supported us thus far. And we are hopeful that the progress distilled in the pages that follow — and, more importantly, in the self-assessments of the GLR communities and the reports of our partners — merits continued confidence as well as continued investment of time, talent, energy, passion and the necessary financial and moral support.

Ralph Smith
MANAGING DIRECTOR