



WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Only one out of every three students in Metro Nashville Public Schools is able to read on grade level by the end of third grade, a challenge the city has faced for more than two decades.

Why does third grade reading matter? It's the point when students go from learning to read to reading to learn. Studies show that children not reading on grade level by this point struggle to learn across subjects and rarely catch up. Kids not reading on grade level by third grade are also four times more likely to drop out of high school and are at a higher risk of arrest or incarceration. As a community, we must do more to support our kids from birth all the way to graduation.

Ninety percent of a child's brain develops before age five, with the most significant development occurring from birth to age three. Kids without high-quality early childhood experiences are 25 percent more likely to drop out of school and 60 percent less likely to attend college. Quality child care is expensive, with some waiting lists up to two years long—a burden for even the most affluent families. As Nashville grows and child care becomes harder to attain, this gap will continue to widen.

Another critical piece to learning to read is access to a variety of engaging books. But half of all elementary school classrooms have fewer than 100 books with many having none at all, according to the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success. This is particularly detrimental for kids who come from homes with limited access to books.

If children struggling to read on grade level are moved forward through the system without intervention, they are even more likely to fall behind after graduation increasing their chances of poverty or incarceration. We are partnering to double the number of children reading on grade level by 2025. It's a big goal, but one we can—we must—achieve. Our kids deserve an equal chance at a bright future.



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WHAT ARE WE DOING TO HELP?

Together, we can ensure that our most in-need children enter kindergarten ready to learn, develop essential social and emotional skills and are supported throughout their academic career.

Preparing Students for Kindergarten

Children who have not developed basic literacy skills by the time they enter kindergarten are more likely to drop out in later years. United Way works in partnership to ensure children have access to books that are crucial to early brain development, to provide accessible, high-quality child care and pre-K programs, and to deliver training and support for educators to increase the quality of early childhood education.

Access to books is one of the biggest barriers kids face when learning to read and doing well in school. Through Imagination Library of Middle Tennessee, kids receive a free book in the mail

regardless of their family's income every month from birth until their fifth birthday. Studies show that when parents are given books for their children, they are four times more likely to read to their toddlers and preschoolers, and children who are read to regularly at home hear twice as many words every year and have a larger vocabulary by age three.

Another way United Way is investing in early literacy is through our Read to Succeed program, a comprehensive early childhood learning model that builds literacy and social-emotional skills for preschoolers who need it most. Read to Succeed ensures that kids—regardless of social or economic challenges—have the tools they need to reach their highest potential. Read to Succeed started in Nashville in 2004 when only 33 percent of five-year-olds were testing kindergarten-ready.

Read to Succeed has a strong emphasis on home-to-school connection because it's proven that encouragement from parents and family members helps to build confidence.





Since the program's inception, more than 90 percent of Read to Succeed students assess as kindergarten-ready upon completion of the RTS program each year. In 2018, 100 percent of students assessed as kindergarten-ready.

United Way partners with eight early childhood centers across Nashville.

Improving Literacy Rates

If children aren't reading well by third grade, they will most likely struggle to read their social studies texts, understand their math problems or follow directions on their science experiments, and they rarely catch up. United Way partners to infuse literacy into every investment we make.

United Way of Metropolitan Nashville was recently selected as the backbone organization for the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success, a first-of-its-kind citywide literacy plan that aims to double the number of Nashville third-graders reading on grade level by 2025. It's essentially a way for literacy groups, faith and volunteer partners, parents, students and educators to come together to address Nashville's early literacy deficit. The Blueprint's focus includes implementing strategies to support our schools' literacy instruction, provide access to books,

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address chronic absenteeism, curb summer reading loss and improve access to quality after-school programs.

For more information on the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success, visit blueprintforearlychildhoodsuccess.com.

Making Sure Kids Graduate

The time leading up to high school graduation is often a period of excitement and hope for the future. But for kids who lack family support or who have fallen behind their peers, their senior year can be full of fear, frustration and worry if they'll even graduate. And if they do—what's next?

In 2017, 20 percent of Metro Nashville Public School students did not graduate from high school. We are determined to change that statistic to make sure every one of our students makes it through to graduation and has a plan for continuing education, vocational training or career success. To do this, we must give our students social and emotional education through their middle and high school years.

9,000 of our Opportunity Youth—people ages 16 to 24 who are unengaged in the workforce or post-secondary pathways—are failing to find education and employment paths that are substantial to economic mobility. Most aren't accessing state scholarships due to barriers including costs beyond tuition such as books and testing fees, limited transportation options, FAFSA eligibility and difficulties navigating complex systems.

United Way partners to help students through the student loan process and to prepare for the ACT. We also provide opportunities for mentorship, guidance and support to the whole family to help kids walk across the graduation stage and move onto adulthood with confidence. United Way recently awarded two \$100,000 Prosperity Pathways grants, one of which went to the Opportunity Youth Collective which will use the funds to reengage those students who have fallen out of the pipeline and help connect them to workforce training or post-secondary education.

HOW LANGUAGE NUTRITION IMPACTS EARLY LITERACY



Not only is literacy essential for a child's fundamental education and future, it also has significant impacts on physical health and well-being.

Did you know that talking to babies helps their brains grow?

Even though babies may not speak in full sentences yet, talking with them—reading aloud, singing songs, telling stories, asking questions—helps stimulate critical early brain development that is the foundation for learning. Exposing children to rich, engaging vocabulary or “language nutrition” sets the foundation for cognitive ability, literacy and school readiness.

Early language exposure is the single strongest predictor of third grade reading proficiency with long-term impacts on educational success and health.

A solid foundation of language nutrition—the use of language, beginning at birth, that is sufficiently rich in engagement, quality, quantity and context that nourishes the child socially, neurologically and linguistically—is critical in developing a child's capacity to learn.

Research demonstrates that the single strongest predictor of a child's academic success is not socioeconomic status, level of parental education, income or ethnicity, but rather the quality and quantity of words spoken to the baby in the first three years of life.

— Originally published by Governor's Books from Birth Foundation

BUT WE COULDN'T DO IT ALONE

We are working to give every child an equal chance at a bright future. Because of your generous commitment, kids are learning and growing with the support they need. Together, we can give every child in our community the opportunity to learn and succeed.

Because of you...



508K

books were distributed
to kids through
Imagination Library of
Middle Tennessee



3,248

students increased
creativity, collaboration,
critical thinking and
communication skills



415

preschoolers gained
early literacy skills
necessary to succeed
in kindergarten



1,297

students showed at
least a year's growth
in key literacy and
academic skills



MEET AMARE

Seven-year-old Amare dreams of becoming a scientist when he grows up.

Some days, he says he wants to be a firefighter and other days a police officer. Even as a first-grader, Amare is very technically-minded, interested in thinking critically and exploring his world.

"He likes to see how things work," his mother Omeka says. "I'm pushing him to be independent."

But despite his determination, Amare struggled as he learned to read throughout kindergarten. Omeka noticed he was having speech trouble, so she enrolled him in speech therapy after school. Then she discovered the Y Literacy program through the YMCA of Middle Tennessee, which offers free one-on-one reading tutoring to students who are reading below grade level. That's where he met his tutor and friend Heather. Heather and Amare spend every Monday afternoon together, working on phonics, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary.

"Just from working with Heather for the fall semester, he made a whole year's growth," says Jordan Waller, senior director of the Y Literacy program. "He went from [reading on] kindergarten level to the beginning of first-grade level. It's hard to make an entire year's growth in that short of time."

Heather starts each session by reading a book. Heather reads and points out specific pictures and words. Whenever she sees him struggling, she encourages Amare to break the sentences down.

"I just say 'What's this word? OK, what's this word?' Then we put it together. He's getting really good at that."

This program is important for students like Amare because of the individualized attention he gets.



Amare is vibrant and energetic but at school he's more reserved. With Heather, he has the confidence to ask questions that he might not ask at school.

"He's very inquisitive with me," Heather says.

Omeka says she knows Amare is strong-willed and will continue to excel in school.

"He has it in him. He wants to learn," she says. "He adores math. I keep telling him, 'You have to have both pieces. You've got to be able to read well so that you can do the math.'"

And Omeka is exactly right. In a couple years, Amare's reading skills will be critical to his success in other subjects. And with dreams of becoming a scientist, learning to read is an integral investment in Amare's future.

About Leaders United

Leaders United donors provide the foundation for a better community with a generous annual gift of \$500 or more. Your gifts allow us to continue to fight for the health, education and financial stability of every person in our community.

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\$500 - \$999

McGavock Level
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Alpha Chapter Level**
\$10,000+

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\$5,000 - \$9,999

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- Find a volunteer opportunity
- Host a poverty simulation
- Build Comradery with a Cause by recruiting friends or colleagues to create kits for our neighbors in need
- Share this newsletter with friends and families

Contact Info

Celeste Wilson
Senior Director, Major Gifts
615.780.2403
celeste.wilson@uwmn.org

Kate Keene
Director, Major Gifts
615.780.2460
kate.keene@uwmn.org



United Way of Metropolitan Nashville