



IOWA
CAMPAIGN FOR
**GRADE-LEVEL
READING**

3RD GRADE READING
SUCCESS MATTERS

IN A NEW LIGHT

Philanthropy-Serving
Organizations and
Co-Funding Projects

THE POWER OF SHARED GOALS,
NEW ROLES, AND STAYING AT THE TABLE

IOWA CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING

JAN 2014 – DEC 2021

Sharing Success

This report captures the shared success of Iowa funders and the Iowa Council of Foundations (ICoF) through our involvement in the Iowa Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. This endeavor began with a few simple questions:

- 1 How can funders come together around an issue?
- 2 What happens when funders align to support shared goals?
- 3 What if they support those goals with grantmaking resources, but also with time, skills and leadership?
- 4 What if a philanthropy-serving organization (PSO) broadens the vision of its role, in both serving and guiding its network?
- 5 And what happens when these organizations choose the long view over short-term successes?

The result – *so far* – encompasses better readers, a stronger sense of the power of our collective efforts, a PSO with a redefined vision of its role, and several lessons learned along the way. We are delighted to be sharing this all with the field.



What is the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading?

The Campaign is a collaborative effort by foundations, nonprofits, business leaders, government agencies, states and communities across the nation to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship. The Campaign focuses on an important predictor of school success and high school graduation — grade-level reading by the end of third grade.

Research shows that proficiency in reading by the end of third grade enables students to shift from **learning to read** to **reading to learn**. Most students who fail to reach this critical milestone falter in the later grades and often drop out before earning a high school diploma. Yet two-thirds of U.S. fourth graders are not proficient readers, according to national reading assessment data. This disturbing statistic is made even worse by the fact that more than four out of every five low-income students miss this critical milestone.

Although schools must be accountable for helping all children achieve, the Campaign is based on the belief that schools cannot succeed alone. Engaged communities mobilized to remove barriers, expand opportunities, and assist parents in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities to serve as full partners in the success of their children are needed to assure student success.

LEARN MORE AT: www.gradelevelreading.net

Where It All Began

In 2013, ten members of the Iowa Council of Foundations Education Funders Network explored co-funding models as a strategy to support education in our state. (You can view the full 2013 ICoF Education Funders Network co-funding report at: www.iowacounciloffoundations.org/2013-ed.) At the end of that year, the group decided to collectively invest in the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) by utilizing two co-funding strategies as defined by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO):



Targeted Co-funding:

Funders deliberately but independently make a grant to the same program, organization or issue.



Strategic Alignment:

Funders or partners agree to adopt joint or complementary strategies, in pursuit of a common goal.

ADVANCING STRATEGIES

Participating funders made several commitments to support collective work, including agreements to:



Sign a **Memorandum of Understanding** defining shared goals;



Provide community and school-district level data to support statewide metrics and progress monitoring;



Participate in peer-sharing and learning through the ICoF Education Funders Network; and



Complete monthly reports to track grant investments, emerging needs, and the ways funders were supporting their local work.

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This report details our insights on building and sustaining a co-funding model (over an eight-year period) and highlights the evolving roles both funders and our philanthropy-serving organization (PSO) played.

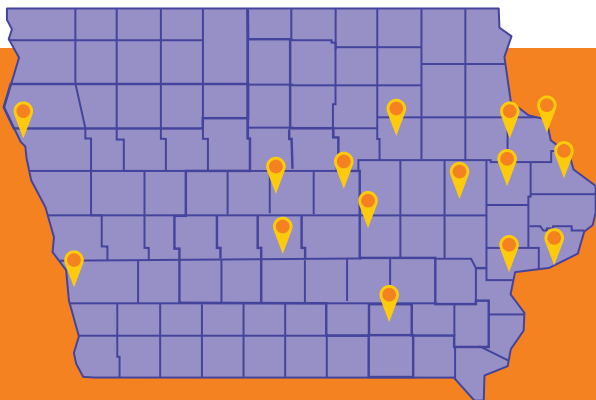


“One thing we learned from the Campaign is that in order to make systemic change in our community, we have to figure out what we want to do and how we can be in it for the long haul. That has driven our work in other areas too. We also learned, if you’re not going to measure it, you’re not going to move the needle.” — Jean Kresse, *United Way of Story County*

Network Outcomes

There were several significant achievements during the eight-year co-funding project period.

COLLECTIVE, STATEWIDE IMPACT:



Ames • Cedar Rapids • Cedar Valley • Council Bluffs • Des Moines
Dubuque • Dyersville • Grinnell • Jackson County • Jones County
Marshalltown • Muscatine • Ottumwa • Quad Cities • Sioux City

GREW FROM

6 TO 15

Campaign
communities

REACHED

61

school
districts

SERVED

7 OF THE 10

largest
districts in Iowa



OVER HALF of low-income children in Iowa
were in GLR communities.

Source: www.datacenter.kidscount.org (2019)

OVER

25,000

VOLUNTEERS

supported
local
Campaigns



in local, regional and
national public and private funds
leveraged for the Iowa Campaign



ICoF members – nearly half of the
ICoF network –made at least one
grant to support the Iowa Campaign

OVER

350

PARTNERS

engaged
in local
Campaigns



Statewide partnerships
were **strengthened**,
including strategic
alignment with
United Ways of Iowa
and Iowa ACEs 360.



The network found a **SHARED VOICE** to
advocate for public policy changes locally at
school districts and at the statewide level.

This included multiple meetings with legislators, three advocacy days at the
State Capitol, strategy meetings with the Iowa Department of Education,
participation in a Governor's Task Force, and specific outreach to House
and Senate Education Committee members.

CO-FUNDING OUTCOMES:



Investment into local Campaign communities and statewide efforts came from a variety of sources including local, state, and national philanthropy dollars, as well as state and federal public dollars. Engagement in the Campaign has positioned many communities and districts to **better leverage funding long-term**.



This was a long-term strategy commitment and investment for many Iowa funders. Iowa funders persisted with seven of the original co-funding partners still engaged with their local Campaigns today.



Funders engaged in various ways, with many playing traditional funder roles by providing grants. However, we were interested in exploring other roles a funder could fulfill. Funders reported stepping into a variety of roles, including many playing new roles. (See pages 10-11 for more details.)



While funders were committed to supporting local projects, participants reported that peer-sharing and the network of support they gained from working together substantially advanced and accelerated their efforts. One funder shared: *“The strength of the network is really being able to take a step back or above to see, ‘What did we learn that we need to carry into other collective impact [work]?’”*



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HONORS AND RECOGNITION:

- **44 Pacesetter Awards** from the National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, more than any other participating state. Communities are honored for exemplary work and reporting observable progress in one or more of the Campaign's priorities.
- The **entire state of Iowa** was recognized with two Pacesetter Awards.
- **5 All-America City Award Finalists** and **3 All-America City Award Winners** in 2017 from the National Civic League.
- **7 Bright Spot Honors** from the National Campaign for recognition of support for early school success. Two of these recognitions were for exemplary or innovative responses to the pandemic.
- **6 Iowa communities** included in 2021 National Campaign Practice Briefs



“The Iowa Council of Foundations demonstrates why the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) acknowledges the mobilization of local philanthropy as the accomplishment of which we are most proud. ICoF's statewide mobilization of local philanthropy has fueled the Iowa GLR Communities individually and collectively to emerge among the very top performers in the CGLR. This is why ICoF's leadership has been invaluable.”

— Ralph Smith, Managing Director, The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

How did ICoF support the Campaign?

The ICoF was the backbone organization for the statewide network. On page 7 is an overview of the strategies we used to support the ICoF Education Funders Network and Iowa Campaign for Grade-Level Reading communities. These are all things we had done before, but utilizing each of these strategies in a coordinated way to support shared goals – *for eight years!* – was new.

This co-funding project would not have been successful – *or sustained* – without funding support for the funder network itself. Over the eight-year period, this project was supported by an anonymous donor. The ICoF applied for, accepted, managed and reported on the grant funds to support both networks. Defining goals and

outcomes for the grants helped anchor our work and now allows us to assess our outcomes and impact.

The ICoF never had more than one full-time and one part-time employee. Each contributed a very small portion of their time to supporting the Campaign throughout. In the early

years, there was also a grant-funded contractor who supported network coordination. Once that funding went away, additional in-kind ICoF staff time was committed to the work. While staffing capacity evolved, the ICoF was able to consistently support both networks in deep and meaningful ways.



RIGHT ORGANIZATION, RIGHT ASSETS TO LEAD

Our partners indicated that the ICoF brought the right assets to the endeavor. As a statewide organization, we could bring multiple partners to the table. Since the ICoF wasn't a direct funder or a fellow supporting organization, we could prioritize the network's voice and goals. It proved essential to have a backbone organization that was flexible, valued participatory engagement, supported equity, and had the ability to create and promote a shared agenda.

In addition to supporting funders, the ICoF also supported staff and volunteers who led local campaigns. The GLR Campaign Community Leads were regularly convened with the ICoF's support. A 2021 GLR Campaign Community Leads survey noted that having a coordinated home allowed for better connectedness and sharing amongst the network, and positioned ICoF to consistently look at the bigger picture. As the designated convener, the ICoF ensured voices from across the state of Iowa were heard, engaged, and leading the GLR initiatives.

**Iowa GLR Campaign
Community Leads shared
other ways in which the
ICoF added value to their
work, including:**

- Providing learning and training opportunities
- Creating cohesion
- Facilitating networking and sharing ideas/resources
- Supporting ideation
- Communicating
- Connecting to other communities and state officials
- Providing tools and resources
- Fostering peer support
- Practicing community building
- Strengthening the partnership with national GLR Campaign

STRATEGIES & SUPPORT

FOR THE ICOf EDUCATION FUNDERS NETWORK &
IOWA CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING COMMUNITIES



“I appreciate the opportunity to have honest conversations in the ICOf Education Funders Network. There’s a lot of trust that goes into making that happen.”

— Monica Chavez-Silva, Grinnell College

2013 Learning Questions ... ANSWERED!

QUESTIONS	<i>How would co-funding amplify the voice of the philanthropic sector in Iowa?</i>	<i>What operational capacity is required by the “hub” (presumably ICoF) to facilitate co-funding? Is this capacity available?</i>	<i>What operational capacity is required by each grantmaker that is involved? Is this capacity available?</i>	<i>Would co-funding generate more resources-for-good in Iowa?</i>
WHAT WE’VE LEARNED (2022)	<p>Co-funding amplified the ICoF’s voice — especially around specific Campaign goals.</p> <p>ICoF member voice was amplified at the local level and collectively through the state and national GLR networks. This included community leadership and public policy efforts across communities.</p> <p>This work also helped us leverage new partnerships and members.</p>	<p>The most needed capacities identified by the ICoF for this work were: staff, time, convening power, strategic partnerships, and funding relationships.</p> <p>Some grant-funded staffing capacity was available at the beginning of the grant period, but the ICoF absorbed many of those responsibilities as the project sustained.</p> <p>The amount of support the ICoF ultimately provided far exceeded what was anticipated at the outset of the project.</p>	<p>Each funder could customize their strategies, which allowed funders to play to their strengths and evolve capacity over time.</p> <p>Community leadership was unlocked when staff held or gained the power from their boards or senior leaders to exercise roles in addition to grantmaking.</p> <p>See the “New Roles” section on page 10 to explore the different roles funders played during the Campaign. All were valuable, but required varying capacities that changed over time.</p>	<p>A resounding YES! The network leveraged additional state and federal funds, plus local, state and national philanthropic dollars.</p> <p>Iowa funders were integral in leveraging dollars locally by securing grants and working with individual donors.</p> <p>Additionally, many pilot projects were initially funded by philanthropy and then brought to scale through partnerships with school districts using public resources to institutionalize and sustain what was working.</p>
EXAMPLES	<p>The Iowa Campaign for GLR State Lead, ICoF President, a community Campaign Lead and an ICoF member were all invited to join the Governor’s Iowa Chronic Absenteeism Advisory Council in 2016. The Council made 10 recommendations to help districts and communities improve the attendance of students who miss 10% or more of the school year. Our early advocacy on this issue helped spur action for the Iowa Department of Education and Governor’s office.</p>	<p>The ICoF utilized a variety of staffing models to support the work including: contracting with the Iowa Campaign for GLR State Lead, hiring a part-time communications coordinator, and then leveraging grant funds to underwrite ICoF staff time. With each of those staffing models, there were increasing amounts of ICoF staff time provided in-kind to support the work.</p>	<p>We saw many funders deeply engaged when Community Solutions Action Plans, a requirement to participate in the Campaign, were developed.</p> <p>Many funders played critical roles in organizing partners and developing plans. As the work began, many – though not all – funders shifted away from network leadership roles into network support roles. This required new capacities, time and resources.</p>	<p>The Campaign prepared communities and their partnering school districts to effectively leverage funding. In August 2021, over \$3M in state mental health grants were awarded to Iowa Campaign for GLR school districts from the Iowa Department of Education and Governor’s Mental Health grants, which represented approximately 45% of the total funds awarded.</p>

“The flexibility of the Campaign and the opportunity to explore and expand is one of the first things we learned about in an outreach call to Campaign leaders in another Iowa Campaign community. That flexibility has helped us to adapt and adjust based on our local community needs.”

— Melissa Strovers, Grinnell College

At the end of the 2013 co-funding exploration, several learning questions remained. Eight years later, those questions have been answered and we hope this learning can be applied to other Iowa priorities and assist PSOs as they manage funder collaboratives.

<p>What are the barriers inherent in co-funding? What are the likely problems that will be encountered?</p>	<p>What are common concerns for funders?</p>	<p>Would co-funding build or threaten relationships among funders? What needs to be in the system to ensure positive relationships?</p>	<p>How are local vision, goals, and needs accommodated or enhanced by working together?</p>
<p>A huge strength to our work was also one of the biggest barriers: VARIETY! This showed up as different levels of support (monetarily, in-kind and staffing capacity); funders prioritizing Campaign strategies differently based on their local needs; and funders staying engaged and invested in the work for varying durations.</p> <p>A “one size fits all” approach to the Campaign was not found across the network (in Iowa nor across the country). This created challenges for learning, support and replication.</p>	<p>This initiative confirmed the concerns that funders identified in 2013. Many Iowa funders are place-based, meaning their funding is geographically restricted. There are very few statewide funders in Iowa.</p> <p>There were also emerging concerns about funding and staffing sustainability throughout the project. Our co-funding model was successful because funders were able to support the network-level goals by funding customized, tailored strategies based on needs in their communities.</p>	<p>Having shared goals while independently executing plans at a local level built relationships across the network.</p> <p>Each funder had some level of influence and choice in their local Campaign – or for statewide funders, in some cases, across multiple Iowa Campaign communities. We believe that made this a positive experience for participants and strengthened the network overall.</p>	<p>Participants were encouraged to share their work with their peers and offer support to one another. This was the most highly valued network benefit reported by ICoF members and Iowa Campaign Leads at the end. Because of this generosity, we even saw some collaborations to leverage models/ideas/resources across the network.</p>
<p>Summer learning models varied among communities and ranged from intensive academic and enrichment programs to book distribution to multi-district offerings in rural areas. The models were customized to the needs of the local communities and were dependent on available resources.</p>	<p>Turnover in local Campaign Lead positions and school districts created barriers to progress. Onboarding, relationship-building and understanding network leadership were time-intensive. At times new leadership served a community well, while other occurrences felt like more of a setback. This, in addition to funder and partner fatigue, slowed momentum. Campaign communities that were deeply supported by ICoF members were often more successful in sustaining and progressing. Ultimately, it was ICoF’s role to trust local leadership to make decisions for their Campaigns.</p>	<p>Funders worked collaboratively to innovate a kindergarten readiness assessment and intervention model. Iowa does not have a standardized assessment.</p> <p>Using teacher input, the Quad Cities Campaign created an assessment of 10 skills for kindergarten, which included a parent awareness campaign. Because this was informed by teachers, they ensured buy-in and participation.</p> <p>This model has been replicated in Cedar Rapids and across the state in Council Bluffs.</p>	<p>Campaign partners in Council Bluffs, Story County and Dubuque jointly applied for funding from First Book. They received \$34,000 in books to distribute to children from low-income families across the three communities.</p>

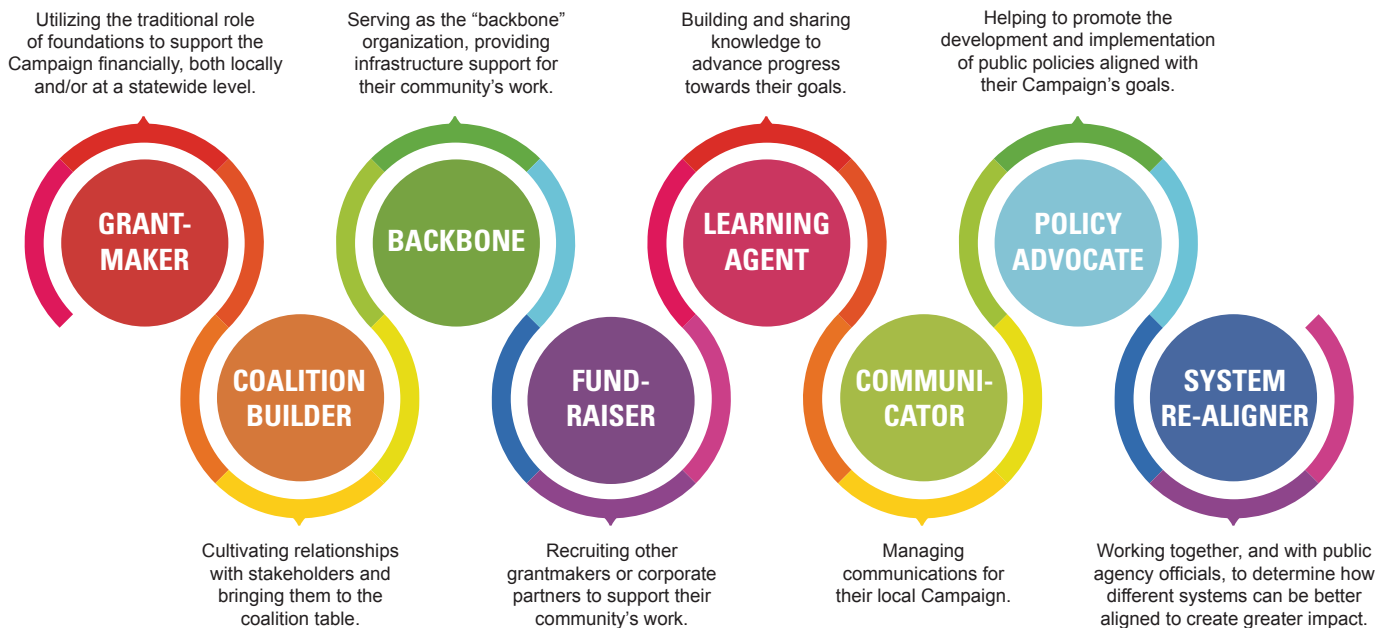
“This gave us one of our earlier experiences in figuring out the continuum of the tools of philanthropy we are using to do our work. We have different types of funders in the ICoF network. This has been an interesting experiment in how we all work together as different funders in the state.”

— Karla Twedt-Ball, Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation

New Roles & Practices for Funders in Communities

Throughout the project, funders reported to ICoF monthly – and later quarterly – the roles they played in their local GLR Campaigns. One funder noted the reporting process itself was a helpful tool. *“I appreciate it. It helps us track what we’re doing and we can look at how it’s changing over time...and know if we’re staffing enough. That has been a really good thing.”*

In these reports, a foundation credited ICoF’s Education Funders Network with helping them develop foresight into how to do the work, what the Campaign would require, and possible roles. This helped them – and other funders – reach milestones more quickly. **The frequency with which funders reported playing each role is detailed below, with those on the left being the most frequently reported or most common roles.**



New Strengths

The Campaign helped funders build on their assets. They shared with us:

- *“Our **grantmaker** role paved the way for us to also be a **coalition builder**.”*
- *“Our longstanding **grantmaking** to youth organizations naturally led us to also becoming a **system re-aligner**.”*
- Another foundation defined its role as a **learning agent**, offering advice and guidance to the **backbone organization**. This kept with its longstanding approach of collaborating with local partners rather than operating in a vacuum.

As Campaign communities sustained, funder roles evolved and they saw themselves in a new light.

- One funder reported ramping up its **backbone** role and as their Campaign progressed, moving from “visionary/cheerleader” to “maintenance/problem-solver.”
- Another said the local Campaign’s **backbone organization** now does **coalition building**.
- A third moved more into **grantmaking**, encouraging partners to lead the Campaign and working to broaden their Campaign geographically.

Those funders initially supporting the Campaign generated buy-in and support from additional ICoF members. Early leadership and adoption from Iowa funders also helped accelerate success in other communities. *“We have learned from other communities across the country in the National Campaign that in order to be sustainable, we must do heavy lifting, build relationships and give support on the front end so our partners then feel empowered to drive and sustain the work.”*

Exercising these roles created new strengths. Many ICoF members continue to support their Campaign communities and also flex their new muscles in support of other causes important to Iowans.

Seeing Ourselves in a New Light

ICoF'S ROLE & HOW IT CHANGED US

For the Iowa Council of Foundations, supporting this funder collaborative has revolutionized the way we see ourselves, understand what's possible, and envision our role moving forward.

Our work on the Campaign moved our organization into more strategic leadership and a guiding role. It transformed the way we think about our work. We still provide valuable, traditional membership benefits, but now we also see the vital role we play in helping our network grow, evolve, adopt new strategies, and come together to support shared goals. Changing our lens from a hyper-focused spotlight to a broader floodlight helps us see that the ultimate beneficiaries of our leadership and mission are all Iowa communities, not just our member organizations.

REALIZING A NEW ROLE

During our 2015 strategic planning process the ICoF Board named this new role as an opportunity broker. We use an opportunity lens to identify emerging regional and national programs, models and funding that we can bring to our members, to our network, and to Iowa.

Since naming our opportunity broker role, we have leveraged funds for our network to improve foundation openness, address racial equity, optimize disaster philanthropy, and advance rural equity. We will continue to use our lens to spot opportunities for our network moving forward.

Evolving Roles, Transitioning Leadership

Just as it was important to understand our role in the co-funding project at the beginning, it has been important for us to recognize how our role, too, must evolve. In the beginning, our role was to engage, energize and mobilize funders around the co-funding project. Then, we played a sustaining role in support of our members and their GLR Campaigns.

Throughout the project, we have been listening to our members and their own engagement has guided our direction. As the work progressed over eight years, funder priorities, staffing capacity, and local Campaign leadership evolved and we recognized the ICoF's work was reaching fewer funders. Our Board and staff recognized that while our infrastructure was supporting GLR communities, our work was becoming less focused on funders, our network, and our core mission. This, along with emerging and competing funder priorities — *including COVID-19 pandemic response and response efforts to natural disasters like the August 2020 derecho* — led us to decide to move forward with a thoughtful transition planning period.

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Lessons for PSOs

As we evolved our thinking and approach, so too have many PSOs. Co-funding projects, peer-learning cohorts, communities of practice, and funder collaboratives are now part of many PSO's programs and services. We offer these lessons to our PSO colleagues and invite your additions and adaptations.

- **SHARED GOALS.** Get on the same page early and put your goals and commitments in writing through devices like MOUs.
- **TAKE A LONG VIEW.** Change doesn't happen overnight. Is everyone ready to commit to a long-term, collective strategy?
- **SUPPORT ACCOUNTABILITY.** Agree to regular check-ins and reporting on common metrics.
- **PUT SOMEONE IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT.** A backbone organization or network hub serves as the convener and the reporter, and creates capacity to support the on-the-ground work.
- **SHARE POWER.** Ask network members to make decisions about both their individual and collective work.
- **DOUBLE YOUR ESTIMATE OF THE TIME IT TAKES.** This work is time intensive and requires that PSOs use all of their resources — people, time, and funding.
- **COVER YOUR COSTS.** Do not absorb all costs into the PSO operating budget. Raise grant funds, charge participation fees, or develop a blended structure to fund the important work of facilitating and convening.
- **PLACE-BASED FUNDERS KNOW THEIR COMMUNITIES BEST.** Let local funders determine their own strategies in support of broader statewide, regional or national goals. One size won't fit all.
- **SHARE AND REPEAT LIBERALLY.** Ideas, models, resources, time, successes and even failures are helpful. As leaders come and go there is a need to repeat and reshare the lessons.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In the summer of 2020, with 18 months of funding remaining to support the project, we dedicated resources to a strategic transition – both for the Iowa Campaign for GLR and also for the ICoF Education Funders Network. We know many of our members will continue to be involved in their local Campaigns and the state and national GLR networks. Because of this, the ICoF will remain a partner in the Campaign, but will no longer be the fiscal agent or serve in backbone capacities. Informed by the Iowa Campaign network, work is underway to identify a new “home” organization for the Iowa Campaign to serve these roles in this next chapter.

We know a significant number of ICoF members continue to support education priorities in Iowa. We believe there may be opportunities for future co-funding projects in Iowa. So, we’re pulling out our 2013 playbook and beginning this process again. Together, the ICoF Education Funders Network is beginning exploration to determine: what everyone is doing and where there is alignment; willingness to commit time and resources to a shared goal/strategy; and the additional resources that could be leveraged from a co-funding model to support bigger outcomes and impact in Iowa. We are committed to serving as an opportunity broker to elevate and accelerate whatever may be on the horizon for our members. We’re eager to determine what’s next!

Keep Shining

Eight years ago, we started with a glimmer of an idea. We hoped our collective work would benefit children in Iowa – **and it did!** Thousands of young people are better readers today because of this effort. Eight years ago, some participants might have foreseen that this work could affect their organizations as well, but it is doubtful many would have predicted just how much that glimmer would catch on, and spread, and change us. This Campaign challenged us to see ourselves in a new light and see just how much we can do – as funders, as a network, and as a PSO. We hope other funders and PSOs are emboldened by what we have learned. Together, we can transform the way philanthropy strategically partners around big issues and commits to shared goals in order to create positive, lasting impacts on our communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our deep gratitude to Becky Miles-Polka, Iowa State Lead for the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Becky’s leadership was instrumental in engaging new funders and Campaign communities. Her one-on-one coaching supported Campaign community leads in meaningful ways.

And a very special note of appreciation to members of the ICoF Education Funders Network for their steadfast commitment to the Campaign. Your contributions and leadership took this work further than we could have ever dreamed. Onward!



www.gradelevelreading.net



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