



UNITED WAY
Berks County

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Growing Readers: Helping Children Be Kindergarten-Ready

Background Information

Many children enter school lacking key language, literacy, pre-math, and social-emotional skills. Research shows these gaps begin to emerge as early as 9 months of age. Gaps in school readiness are the result of disparities in children's early learning experiences, both at home and in childcare settings. By age 3, children from the most disadvantaged families have heard 30 million fewer words than children of higher-income parents.*

By the time a child enters Kindergarten, their brain has grown to 90% of its capacity.** To support this brain development, families may take advantage of early learning childcare centers to provide a quality education for their child not just a "day care" service. Children enrolled in high-quality centers experience benefits beyond Kindergarten readiness. Research shows there are longer-term benefits including more likely to graduate and be higher earners in the workforce.



However, only about 40% of childcare capacity in Berks County is considered high-quality***. Quality standards are set by Keystone STARS program that monitors childcare centers, Head Start, and other school-aged programs certified by the Department of Human Services. The Keystone STARS* is a process for childcare centers to increase their quality in four key areas including staff education, learning environment, leadership, and family/community partnerships. Of more than 140 centers in Berks County, about 1/3 of childcare centers have achieved a STAR 3 or 4 status.

While early childhood educators play a critical role in developing 90% of a child's brain, as shared above, the educational requirements and training to be a childcare worker is not consistent across the country. In Pennsylvania, the minimum requirements for an Early Childhood Educator are a high school diploma and some experience working with children. In other segments of the education industry, it is expected that educators obtain specialized degrees in education and/or child development.****

Sources:

- *White Paper: "Quality Pre-K: Starting Early to Close Achievement Gaps and Boost Student Achievement" by Sara Mead 2012 Stand for Children Leadership Center
- **Brain Development . (2021). Retrieved from First Things First : <https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/brain-development/>
- ***Facts About Child Care (Berks County). Retrieved from <https://www.papartnerships.org/cc-factsheets/county2021/Berks%20County%202021%20Start%20Strong%20PA.pdf>
- ****Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/02/Early-Childhood-Workforce-Index-2020.pdf>

Visit www.readysetreadberks.org to learn more

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Growing Readers Summary

CREATING BETTER OPPORTUNITIES

Growing Readers is designed to increase the skills and retention of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs).

Program highlights include:

- Working ECEs obtain Child Development Associate (CDA)®, a nationally recognized credential, by attending courses at Reading Area Community College (RACC).
- Unique wrap-around services help the ECEs successfully obtain the accreditation and use acquired skills in the classroom. (United Way/RSR staff provides technical support throughout the process, including classroom observation, modeling and coaching.)
- A stipend to support ECEs enrolled in the program; continued stipends for an additional three years help retain the ECEs to provide classroom continuity and stability.
- Third party evaluation of the ECEs to measure program effectiveness and inform coaching for ECEs.



Impact

- Thirteen Cohorts, consisting of 108 ECEs, have completed classroom instruction. 69 have obtained their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. 37 ECEs remain teaching at their original childcare center after earning credential; providing consistency and stability for students. After two years, 81% remain in their original childcare and/or in the ECE field.
- Twenty of the ECEs are pursuing an Associate's Degree; seven have graduated.
- ECEs, receiving their CDA, are evaluated using an assessment tool (the ELLCO or CIRCLE) to measure the quality of the classroom environment and teaching practices. The assessment identifies areas of development for the ECEs to receive coaching and classroom modeling.

Read Alliance: Improving Berks County Literacy Achievement

Background Information

Early literacy is essential for educational progress. Children's reading levels at third grade are one of the most significant and reliable predictors of future attainment; if a child is unable to read by third grade, they will struggle in school and are more likely to drop out of high school. Students need foundational reading skills to learn, graduate and succeed; and without them, their future success and our community's are at risk.



"Mental health and literacy are linked," according to Harold S. Koplewicz, MD, founding president and medical director of the Child Mind Institute. He further states, "Children who struggle with reading are at higher risk for mental health challenges, such as low esteem, anxiety, depression and behavioral problems. The greatest impacts of inadequate reading support are felt by the children, families, and communities that are already the most vulnerable." With only 50% of Berks County third graders reading proficiently based on state assessments, it is an imperative to utilize innovative and evidence-based strategies to increase literacy to provide greater mental well-being and academic success.

United Way of Berks County has been managing an in-school tutoring program for over ten years utilizing volunteers. Volunteer tutors are matched with struggling readers in first through third grades, meeting one day a week to work on literacy skills. Anecdotally, from teachers, parents and volunteer tutors, we know many of the students experience improvement from this small intervention. And school districts with the resources to manage the logistics internally request the volunteer tutoring program continue year-after-year.

United Way of Berks County became familiar with the Read Alliance program in 2018. The program's dosage, use of teen tutors, phonics-based curriculum, evaluation tool and in-school delivery made the model appealing to United Way. It was a gift from MacKenzie Scott at the end of 2020 that made piloting Read Alliance possible in partnership with the Reading School District.

Read Alliance Summary

Read Alliance works to accelerate the educational trajectory of early elementary students through the power of teens who provide one-to-one literacy tutoring in under-resourced communities, with over 20 years of third-party evaluated success in New York City. Berks County was the location for the first program launched outside of NYC. The program is now replicated in other Pennsylvania communities and other states.

Read Alliance provides striving readers with the building blocks to academic success through phonics instruction based on the science of reading, which is evidence-backed through over 50 years of research according to the National Center on Improving Literacy. Our leveled reading program reinforces foundational reading skills and phonemic awareness. Systematic phonics instruction entails learning to recognize the most common and consistent letter-sound pattern and working towards more difficult and less consistent sounds. This helps with word identification, building up sight-word vocabularies, and promoting fluent reading.

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The unique model employs teens to provide high dosage tutoring to their younger peers, primarily first graders, tackling a secondary challenge of youth unemployment, particularly among low-income, young people of color. Teens gain meaningful after school employment, become economically empowered, gain career and college pathway exposure, learn important professional skills, and serve as role models for their younger counterparts.

Success Story

Dylan is a first grader at Riverside Elementary. His family supported his participation in Read Alliance because he struggled with reading; his reading skills were at a kindergarten level. Dylan was matched with Gio, his teen tutor. Together, they worked hard to master the phonics-based curriculum and Dylan's reading improved throughout the program. When he was asked how he felt about learning, he shared, "I always wanted to read and learn because I didn't like not knowing how to read."

Dylan's teacher, shared Dylan's bond with Gio motivated his commitment to reading. Working one-on-one practicing reading with Gio was Dylan's favorite part of the day. Dylan jumped two reading levels and with continued practice over the summer he should be on reading level for second grade. Dylan is a more confident student and now volunteers to read aloud in the classroom; he recently shared, "I like to read so much!"

Impact

- 491 K-2nd graders have completed the program.
- 76% of the students made at least 1.0 year's growth in reading.
- 80% of the students had an attendance rate of 65% or higher.
- 323 high school teens gained paid work experience.

