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Mississippi this week launched a collaborative effort to raise the statewide reading proficiency level, beginning with children from low income families, the hardest group to lead to mastery and reading comprehension.

The program – the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading – ideally could involve virtually every person, program and institution engaged in helping children learn, including parents.

The Mississippi Department of Education will not run the program, but it will help as one of the elements to push it to work at the highest possible level. The mix of participants could include civic clubs, churches with volunteer tutors and organizations helping parents ensure that children are not excessively or chronically absent from school.

Oxford and Lafayette County’s schools already are participants in the program as well as the Gulfport schools. Those districts, an official of the National Campaign for Grade Level Reading said, have moved the needle in reading achievement.

A consortium of private-sector not-for-profit foundations has committed to funding the community programs at \$100,000 per year. Tupelo’s CREATE Foundation, Barksdale Reading Institute, the Molpus Foundation and the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi have joined with the Phil Hardin Foundation of Meridian to meet the financial challenge.

The organization has engaged 40 states and schools in more than 300 communities nationwide in the challenge.

The campaign seeks to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career, and productive citizenship. The campaign focuses grade-level reading by the end of third grade, considered an important milestone in preparing children to read with comprehension, which notches up in the fourth grade.

Mississippi Senate Education Committee Chairman Gray Tollison, R-Oxford, said the program should complement the Literacy Promotion Act of 2013, which requires that children read above the lowest achievement level to advance past third grade in Mississippi. The program is commonly called “reading gate.”

The program director, Ashley Shells, will work from the University of Mississippi campus in Oxford. However, she said she expects to spend extensive time traveling the state.

One goal is to develop at least 10 Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Communities statewide.

We believe the will to participate and succeed in the program can be found in at least 10

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Northeast Mississippi school districts, and possibly even more.

The program's inclusion of so many important positive elements in a young child's learning experience should attract parents to make sure their children are participants.

The national campaign's material notes that two-thirds of U.S. fourth graders are not proficient readers, a fact made worse because more than four out of every five low-income students miss the critical milestone.

Mississippi has known for decades it must do better. The grade-level campaign gathers the key elements in helping children learn in positive situations. We need to pursue proficiency with every available resource.

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