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National nonprofit to recruit Mississippi communities for reading program

National reading initiative aims to boost third-grade reading proficiency

by [Jackie Mader](#)

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Five Mississippi communities are in preliminary discussions with the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading to roll out community-based initiatives that will aim to improve third-grade reading success. Hattiesburg, Vicksburg, Clarksdale, Jackson, and New Albany may join Oxford and Gulfport as “Campaign for Grade Level Reading Communities,” which means those cities would receive small grants to roll out or ramp up various educational initiatives like summer learning opportunities or efforts to improve school attendance.

The goal of the Campaign is to help communities rally around their resources and boost learning opportunities, according to Ashley Sheils, director of the Mississippi Campaign for Grade Level Reading. There’s room for more Mississippi cities to join, especially those that are already invested in improving educational opportunity for students. The focus is on low-income students, and the barriers they face to learning how to read proficiently by third grade. While the Campaign helps communities roll out programs and initiatives, the solutions themselves are up to individual communities. “We don’t want to be about a program coming in,” she said. “We want to strengthen what’s already there.”

Third-grade reading proficiency has been a major focus in Mississippi since the legislature passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2013. That act established a “reading gate,” which keeps students from progressing to fourth grade unless they prove reading proficiency on a third-grade reading assessment. In the 2015-16 school year, [92 percent](#) of third graders passed the exam after one retest.

The Campaign for Grade Level Reading, a national partnership between states, businesses and nonprofits, is [supporting communities in 41 states](#). The way it works can vary. In Georgia, for example, a national foundation helped local researchers and organizations train nurses to teach parents about the importance of speaking to babies. In Gulfport, the community partnered with the Bezos Family Foundation, which sponsored the initiative, to provide a smartphone app for parents to help them learn about the same topic.