

## **Editorial: All-American effort: helping children read**

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As we hover between Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, the people of Sarasota and Manatee counties now have another reason to fly the Stars and Stripes: Our community has just been awarded the coveted All-America City Award.

Residents can be especially proud that the award was bestowed in a great American cause: helping low-income children improve their life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness through the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

The nationwide reading campaign, conducted in more than 300 communities and 40 states, was the focus of this year's awards, presented last week by the National Civic League at a ceremony in Denver.

As the Herald-Tribune's Brian Ries reported, the All-America City Awards "recognize efforts that bring together different sections of a community to tackle pressing issues."

The Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading — which incorporates programs in both counties aimed at boosting the number of students reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade — was one of only 15 communities to receive the prestigious award. Hundreds of communities applied.

The Civic League cited the Suncoast Campaign for its ability to "innovatively engage families" in the effort. The local campaign was also one of 48 to be named a Pacesetter, among the national campaign's highest honors, and won additional awards for Best Website, Best Media Story and Best Event.

The national Grade-Level Reading Campaign grew from a recognition of the need for early intervention to improve reading proficiency among children from low-income families.

Reading proficiency by third grade is one of the best predictors of a child's long-term academic, social and economic success. Eighty percent of low-income children fail to read proficiently in fourth grade, compared with 49 percent of more affluent students, the U.S. Department of Education has reported.

To tackle that problem, the Suncoast Campaign has drawn together both counties' school districts and library systems, the Sarasota Housing Authority, the Early Learning Coalition of Manatee County, the Patterson Foundation, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County and numerous other government agencies and civic organizations.

The local effort has engaged in numerous innovative initiatives combining the strengths of its various members.

One example is the Book-Rich Environment drive, in which the Housing Authority is teaming with Sarasota County Libraries to distribute 2,500 free books over the summer to children living in public housing, where many families live in extreme poverty.

After the first book giveaway on June 9, families had the opportunity to register for library cards, sign up for summer reading programs and were even offered free family portraits.

“Having books in the home is a really critical resource,” William Russell, president and CEO of the Housing Authority told the Herald-Tribune. Even if young children can't read, he said, “these are books their parents or older siblings can read to them.”

Programs like the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading can pull divided communities together in a common cause. When we help children succeed in school and life, individuals, families, communities, local and state economies and society all benefit.

That's about as all-American as it gets.



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HIDE CAPTION

Angel Kingsbury, 8, Jasiyah Harrell, 6, and Jason Harrell, 3rd grade, read poetry with teacher Cyndi Brigance, right, at Oneco Elementary School in Bradenton. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a national effort aimed at third grade students. HERALD-TRIBUNE ARCHIVE / THOMAS BENDER/ 2013