**Key Steps in Building a Coalition**

**1. Assess the Community Landscape**

Understanding the lay of the land is critical. Adapting Stephen Covey’s concept of “Seek First to Understand,” take some time to understand what’s happening. You can learn a lot about your community landscape by talking with people, especially in community conversations. Use these [tools](http://unway.3cdn.net/8e505013f84d1cfe50_ksm6btxz0.pdf) to help you think about your community’s readiness to organize an early grade reading coalition. In some communities it will be easier to bring people to the table. But in others, you have to decide who you can join hands with initially, how to grow those “pockets of support,” and how to bring them all together. This depends on your community’s stage of community [life](http://earlygradereading.unitedway.org/sites/default/files/files/The%20Harwood%20Index-5%20Stages%20of%20Community%20Life%281%29.pdf).

Another key factor in assessing the community landscape is to understand who is working in the early grade reading space already. What are they doing? Where do they carry out their work? How are they doing that? What insight can they provide about what’s already happening to help young kids read?

Key players on the early grade reading landscape in your community may include:

* Elected officials, especially mayors who’ve made reading a priority issue (find out more about what mayors are doing [**here**](http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/institute-for-youth-education-and-families/education)).
* School superintendents.
* Elementary school principals.
* Local chapters of teachers’ organizations (AFT, NEA, etc.).
* Parents’ groups (PTAs or PTOs, but also neighborhood-based parent organizations and any loosely-organized organization of parents).
* Churches, synagogues and mosques.
* Libraries.
* Literacy Councils.
* Community organizations that may be rooted in social justice or equity issues, often in low-income neighborhoods.
* Non-profits that run after-school, summer or other programs for young kids outside of school. That could include the Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, Salvation Army.
* Organizations that support mentoring or tutoring efforts for elementary schoolers, including agencies like Big Brothers Big Sisters.
* Community foundations and other funders that support education or young children.
* School foundations (the non-profit fundraising arms of school districts).
* Businesses and corporate partners involved in reading- or education-related products or services.
* Foundations associated with major corporations that actively support education or young children.
* Chamber of Commerce.
* Early childhood coalitions, including Early Learning Councils and others focused on school readiness.

Stakeholder analysis is a key step for exploring shared interests and identifying the potential risks and benefits of developing coalitions. Use existing tools, like the [Ready by 21 Stakeholder Wheel](http://earlygradereading.unitedway.org/sites/default/files/files/Ready%20by%2021%20Stakeholders%20Wheel-Facilitators%20Packet.pdf), to begin your coalition building with a comprehensive scan of the landscape of stakeholders with a vested interest in out-of-school time. In communities with established early grade reading coalitions, use this same tool to identify gaps in representation.

If you’re not sure who’s doing what, one strategy is to convene an asset-mapping session. Asset mapping is a philosophy pioneered by John P. Kretzman and John L. McKnight in their book, [*Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets*.](http://www.amazon.com/Building-Communities-Inside-Out-Mobilizing/dp/087946108X) There are many asset inventory approaches, and United Ways can provide leadership for follow-up and sustainability as the community moves forward implementing change.

Here are four critical questions to be answered in any asset mapping effort, as framed by McKnight and Kretzman.

1. What do we want to do? (Vision and purpose)
2. What do we have to do it with? (Assets)
3. Who or what can get it done? (Individuals, associations, institutions, businesses)
4. How do we get them to do it? (Relationships, community mobilizing)

The best vehicle for answering these questions and for doing the work is a local “table” of *individuals* from the community and representatives from community *associations* and *institutions* who, together, organize the community so it is better connected to mobilize and contribute assets.

This asset mapping conversation is a natural bridge to creating or strengthening an early grade reading coalition. It leads to conversations about doing things differently, aligning and coordinating more. It also helps organizations see where their collective efforts are lacking. Understanding both assets and deficits is critical to developing effective strategies to improve early grade reading.

One relatively easy form of mapping assets (adapted from UWW’s partner, the Forum for Youth Investment) is the butcher paper party. Convene the leaders of all the organizations that you think might (or should) be doing work in early grade reading. Put butcher paper around the room, with a “timeline” of a child’s life from birth through 8. Give each organization a marker, and ask them to “plot” themselves on the continuum. What are they doing for which kids, when and where? As the continuum gets filled up, overlaps and gaps start showing up. And the conversation naturally turns to synergies!

**2. Create or Join an Early Grade Reading Coalition**

Determine whether an education coalition or initiative already exists in your community. If so, how could your efforts complement or coordinate with it? Can your work be achieved by joining the existing coalition? Determine the focus of that initiative, and any challenges it faces*.* You may bring resources that an existing initiative lacks (e.g., a city- or community-wide focus, close ties to the business community, financial resources, research capacity, etc.).

This checklist can help you get a better sense of the “partner landscape” in your community around early grade reading. Use the results of the checklist to identify whether the nucleus of a coalition already exists, whether a new group is already beginning to lead the conversation, and whether the appetite exists for creating a new ad hoc coalition to address the issue of reading.

**TAKING THE PULSE OF YOUR COMMUNITY: A CHECKLIST**

1. Are you seeing the same community “players” at all meetings regarding children, youth and their families? **Yes No**
2. Are new 501(c) 3 organizations cropping up to address specific issues in the community? **Yes No**
3. Are there existing coalitions or collaborative efforts in the community that are in place to address early grade reading? **Yes No**
4. Are most of the needed resources in place – is it more a matter of creating the “public will”? **Yes No**
5. Are existing community sectors and institutions tiring of the old ways of doing business together? **Yes No**
6. Is there an increasing knowledge in the community that what has been done in the past simply is not working? **Yes No**
7. Are the community “powerbrokers” accessible? **Yes No**

In most communities, early grade reading is a nascent issue. That’s beginning to change, as 124 communities across the country are creating community-wide plans to boost early grade reading as part of the [national Grade-Level Reading Network](http://www.gradelevelreading.net/). In those communities, mayors, United Ways, community foundations, libraries, literacy councils and others are organizing formal and informal efforts to create these plans (which must be rooted in strategies to boost school readiness, reduce chronic absence and stem summer learning loss for children through age 8).

**3. Understand Other Agendas**

Whether you join an existing early grade reading coalition, or start your own, it is critical to understand other agendas. This is especially important if your United Way is new to the education conversation. Personalities, politics and past history – which may not be explicitly acknowledged – are always under the surface, especially in education reform.

The players in your early grade reading coalition bring an array of vested interests to the table. This is not a criticism, but one filter through which you should view partnership efforts. School administrators and teachers unions may be vying for power and influence in contract negotiations that involve testing and accountability issues. Elected officials may be polishing their education positions or agendas in light of re-election. Parent groups will bring their own perspectives on the best ways to meet their children’s educational needs. The stakeholders you engage may have a genuine desire to improve early grade reading in the community, but gaining their trust and support requires understanding and navigating their latent interests.

Listening – and using [Community Conversations](http://earlygradereading.unitedway.org/sites/default/files/files/Community%20Conversation%20Workbook%20-%20Harwood.pdf) – can be helpful here. Conducting community conversations with these groups is one strategy to build trust and work around competing agendas. Some United Ways have conducted conversations with segments – teachers, for example – and then later brought teachers, parents and others together for additional conversations. But more importantly, make sure your actions are informed by what you’ve learned in the conversations. Community conversation tools are designed to help you make better choices that are more strategic and rooted in the context of the community.

You may also need to take care to be transparent about United Way’s interests.

Especially if your United Way is new to K-12 education, you may get pushback about why United Way is “getting in the game.” Here again, drawing on your community conversations is a good strategy. If your United Way has helped give voice to the community’s aspirations and concerns about education – and you’ve made that public – you can hold up that mirror to the existing education stakeholders. United Way’s historic role as neutral convener is an important credibility builder here. One collaboration resource worth noting is [*The Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey*](http://www.amazon.com/Collaboration-Handbook-Creating-Sustaining-Enjoying/dp/0940069032), by Michael Winer (who did not have a web site at this writing.) He suggests collaboration happens when we:

1. Envision results by working individual to individual, to build trust.
2. Empower ourselves by working individual-to-organization, to confirm roles and organize the effort.
3. Ensure success by working organization to organization, to manage the work and renew the effort.
4. Endow continuity by working collaboration-to-community, to create visibility, involve the community – and change the system.

**4. Defining the Problem with Your Coalition**

Although your United Way may have done initial spadework, it is best to work with your early grade reading coalition to formally define the problem.

Check the data. You will want to work with your coalition to understand the [community landscape](http://earlygradereading.unitedway.org/sites/default/files/files/Community%20Landscape%20Template.doc) in early grade reading. That includes looking at what the data says, how the public views the issue, what other stakeholders in your community think, and who else is doing what.

If you haven’t already packaged your Community Conversations in a public document, now is the time to do so. Holding a mirror up to the community’s aspirations, needs and wants is part of what it takes to define the problem through the community’s eyes.

Building on its work in Community Conversation packaging, the United Way of

San Diego created an [Education Research Overview](http://earlygradereading.unitedway.org/sites/default/files/files/Education%20Research%20Overview%20FINAL.pdf) modeled on and borrowing from United Way Worldwide’s). It includes community data and insights from local experts and is designed as a tool to:

* Elevate the issue.
* Position United Way.
* Engage with more people.
* Engage with more institutions.
* Engage donors with facts.

**5. Put a Stake in the Ground with Your Coalition**

Your coalition will need to put a marker down on the issue of early grade reading. Whether or not you lay out a specific goal – like recruiting a certain number of reading buddies, or increasing end-of-year reading scores by a certain percentage by a date certain – you will need to clearly state a goal and be ready to show progress down the road. It’s part of [building awareness](http://earlygradereading.unitedway.org/awareness/building-awareness).