



# Documenting the Success of LIGHT: (Literacy Generates Hope for Tomorrow)

# LIGHT

Early Reading First Grant – 2007-11

United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta

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United Way of  
Metropolitan Atlanta

# Dedication

This publication is dedicated to the partners, teachers, families, and staff that participated in the Early Reading First LIGHT grant in Cobb County. A special thanks for your time, dedication and commitment to the education of our children.





**This is a report on the success of Literacy Generates Hope for Tomorrow (LIGHT), a project developed from an Early Reading First grant awarded to United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta by the U.S. Department of Education. The report is composed of an overview and three segments. To access a segment directly, click on its link below:**

- › Unique Approaches to Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators**
- › A Professional Learning Community of Literacy Coaches: Coaching the Coach**
- › Transition to Kindergarten: KinderCamp!**

# Overview

## Documenting the Success of LIGHT United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta Early Reading First Grant - 2007-11

**Early Reading First was created in 2002 as a program of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Federal funds were awarded competitively to local programs that showed they would enhance young children's language and cognitive development by providing high-quality instruction and ongoing professional development based on scientifically-based reading research.**

The mission of Early Reading First is to ensure that all children enter kindergarten with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills for continued success in school. In Metropolitan Atlanta, four Early Reading First (ERF) grants are the nexus for a series of efforts serving more than 1,000 preschool and pre-k children of low-income families<sup>1</sup>. The grants were awarded to United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. They were/are: DREAM (years 2005-08); READERS (years 2006-10); LIGHT (years 2007-11); and APPLE (years 2009-present).

The overall theme of Early Reading First is to support language and literacy development, which is the strongest predictor of school success. This report examines elements of the Literacy Generates Hope for Tomorrow (LIGHT) grant and selected best practices in the areas of professional development for early childhood professionals in the realm of language and literacy, as well as the transition to a kindergarten component of the grant.

The report is composed of three feature articles highlighting the impact LIGHT had on individuals, schools and the community. Through their compelling stories, one can begin to understand and see the opportunities offered and the lessons learned from:

### **[Unique Approaches to Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators](#)**

A focus on multiple strategies to meet the needs of adult learners.

### **[A Professional Learning Community of Literacy Coaches: Coaching the Coach](#)**

A focus on an innovative professional development structure.

### **[Transition to Kindergarten: KinderCamp!](#)**

A focus on a sustainable kindergarten transition program.

Click the links above to access these segments of the LIGHT report or continue reading.

# The LIGHT Grant

LIGHT stands for Literacy Generates Hope for Tomorrow. The acronym expresses the thoughts shared in a familiar quote from South African statesman Nelson Mandela, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." A part of the world in Cobb County, Georgia, was changed for the better by the LIGHT grant, through classrooms in four centers of excellence<sup>i</sup>, serving approximately 280 children in the City of Marietta. LIGHT focused on classroom, professional development and family literacy strategies that are grounded in Scientifically-Based Reading Research (SBRR).

LIGHT was successful in supporting the national ERF program goals, which are:

- To support local efforts to enhance the early language, literacy, and pre-reading development of preschool-age children, particularly those from low-income families, through strategies and professional development that are based on Scientifically-Based Reading Research
- To provide preschool-age children with cognitive learning opportunities in high-quality language and literature-rich environments so that the children can attain the fundamental knowledge and skills necessary for optimal reading development in kindergarten and beyond

- To demonstrate language and literacy activities based on Scientifically-Based Reading Research that support the age-appropriate development of
  1. Oral language (vocabulary, expressive language, listening and comprehension)
  2. Phonological awareness (rhyming, blending, segmenting)
  3. Print awareness
  4. Alphabetic knowledge
- To use screening assessments to effectively identify preschool-age children who may be at risk for reading failure

Early Reading First grant projects have concrete community impact and replicable elements that encourage funders to make investments paying real dividends – in the short term – for children and families. Ultimately, those dividends benefit the communities in which we live. United Way, because of its mission to support children and families, is similarly committed to advancing the success of Early Reading First elements beyond the funding of the grants.

For more information about United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta's commitment to education, visit [unitedwayatlanta.org/OurWork/Education/Pages/Education.aspx](http://unitedwayatlanta.org/OurWork/Education/Pages/Education.aspx)



# Unique Approaches to Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators

“Hitting a home run” is not just for baseball. It’s when you succeed beyond expectations – in business or school or any endeavor where effort results in something pretty spectacular. That’s what happened with the LIGHT project in its first year.

LIGHT is the third of four Early Reading First three-year grant projects awarded to United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE). Included in its goals was the professional development of teachers in the early learning centers that were part of the project – through multiple strategies that would appeal to a wide variety of adult learners. The result? “The widest array of professional development opportunities that I have seen to date,” is how a renowned early literacy expert characterized the grant’s first-year approach.

The assessment came from Dr. William Teale, site visitor commissioned by the USDOE/ERF program office. He also noted that LIGHT “has accomplished what it set out to in its first year of operation and promises to remain a project that will significantly enhance children’s readiness to succeed in literacy during their school years and build strong centers of preschool literacy instruction.”

The multiple strategies employed in the LIGHT project included approaches that would serve various types of adult learners in the Cobb County early education teacher population, including:

- On-site, personalized coaching
- Training classes with two outside providers
- Opportunities to attend symposiums and institutes
- Customized workshops and curriculum support

Katrina Mitchell, Senior Director of Education for United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, oversaw the implementation of United Way’s four ERF grants. Mitchell, who was initially an ERF project director, said the basis for the professional development component was Scientifically-Based Reading Research (SBRR) with high-quality classroom applications. “The idea was to provide a variety

of professional development opportunities that would meet teachers where they are in the professional careers. This would help teachers to develop a range of knowledge and skills, ultimately impacting children’s early literacy development in a positive way.”

Among the key ingredients in the LIGHT professional development plan was coaching for early childhood teachers. Dr. Teale noted that the United Way project’s “approach to coaching is commendable” and the teachers commented they felt supported by their coaches and believed that coaching contributes to gains in their practice.

Initial LIGHT Project Director Elizabeth Lilly, Ph. D., took a leave of absence from a position in higher education to head up the grant program. “One of the things I determined was that my role was to help the coaches grow professionally as much as they could,” said Lilly, “so that they, in turn, could help the teachers. The teachers were provided lots of professional development through LIGHT. Even from my perspective it was remarkable. One of the ripples from this is that some of the teachers applied to college for the first time or resumed their studies, and one is even pursuing her Master’s degree.”

Early education teacher Stephanie Magee, originally from Louisiana, will receive her Bachelor’s degree and teaching certificate in birth through five from Mercer University at the end of 2011. “When I was younger, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, but after visiting a primary school on a work-study program, I fell in love with the kids,” said Magee, “and then I went to the University of New Orleans in elementary education.” After Hurricane Katrina, Magee had to move and relocated to Georgia, so her education was put on hold.

Magee was a teacher in one of the centers in the first United Way ERF project, and later joined a center in the LIGHT project. “I love the OWL curriculum and knew how to teach it because I learned it in the DREAM project, so I could help others as it was introduced to my new center,” said Magee. “One of the teachers said she learned so much from me about how to read stories, change voices and ask questions before you open the book. I feel like an ambassador for OWL!”

Elizabeth Clarkson was the Literacy Coach assigned to Magee's Center. "Elizabeth is my favorite person in the whole world," said Magee. "When I got with her, she made me even better. I was able to present at the Early Reading First Symposium (an annual conference for Early Reading First teachers) and learned how to be more effective in the classroom. When you work with a coach, it's not really a critique, it's like a mirror. You are seeing your reflection."

Former Literacy Coach Barbara McWethy said that because the LIGHT project assigned a coach to each center, being with the same teachers every day allowed her to see classroom dynamics and be more focused and effective. "I saw a lot of growth among the teachers. It wasn't that they were broken, we were just trying to show them new and better ways. Most of the teachers appreciated having the sounding board."

Teacher Bobbie Rosser, with a background in nonprofit management and ten years of experience teaching pre-k, said that she appreciated the new information from coaches and classes. "Things have changed since I was in college. It's like continuing education and I did learn a lot. When you are building scaffolding you build on what you already know."

### **Partnerships for Professional Development**

In addition to the intensive coaching for teachers, there were traditional professional development opportunities, such as classes and institutes, offered throughout the course of the grant. There were two professional development partners. United Way partnered with Mercer University and Quality Assist (a training and technical assistance firm) to provide teacher training and other components of professional development.

Associate Professor of Language and Literacy Education at Mercer University, Karen Davis, Ph. D., was the coordinator of training and facilitator for nine courses provided by Mercer. "I attended the LIGHT project staff weekly meeting to discuss the growth of the preschool teachers and what courses we wanted to offer next. We used the ELLCO results to help in formulating our plans, and the coaches were encouraged to attend the trainings so they could be more effective in supporting the teachers."

"The best part of the project was that I was able to go into the classroom, too. I saw the teachers grow and they became near and dear to my heart," said Davis. "I would walk into a classroom and the teacher would literally take my hand and show me what they did as a result of taking a

course. They were great before, but now they are really star teachers."

Davis noted that she also participated in strategic planning discussions with Quality Assist and center directors to coordinate training themes. In addition to customized and facilitated five-hour teacher trainings using different content and methods from

**To encourage attendance, courses were provided to teachers by Mercer University once a month, on a Saturday and a weekday, at various locations. Substitute teachers were provided through the LIGHT grant to enable teachers to attend weekday sessions.**

**Karen Davis, Ph.D., associate professor of Language and Literacy Education at Mercer, developed and taught these courses:**

- **Emergent Writing**
- **Children's Literature**
- **Storytelling and Early Literacy Skills**
- **Working with English Language Learners**
- **Dramatic Play Activities that Teach Pre-Reading Skills**
- **Being a Brilliant Preschool Literacy Teacher**
- **Songs and Fingerplays: Music and Early Reading Skills**
- **I'm 3! What about me? I'm 4! I need more!: Differentiating Instruction using the OWL Curriculum**
- **Books, Centers and Materials: Creating a Literacy Rich Environment**

the Mercer courses, Quality Assist delivered the high-impact Challenging Teachers Institute each year to LIGHT teachers.

Quality Assist, as a partner with United Way in previous ERF projects, brought continuity and experience to the LIGHT grant and coordinated training with the existing READERS grant. "It was determined early on that the professional development efforts of these two projects should run parallel to each other as the goals were similar and the teachers would benefit from collaborative learning," said Gillian Gansler, project director at Quality Assist.

"The legacy of projects like this is seen in the teachers who learn new skills and discover who they are as teachers, and that reflects directly on the children," says Gansler. "Parents come back to report that their children are ready for school and some have been placed in gifted programs in kindergarten. When one teacher improves her practices, the benefits continue over time and in their classes for years to come."

The annual Challenging Teachers Institute, a five-day summer program, incorporated child and classroom data and was re-designed each year with feedback from the project management staff, coaches and LIGHT teachers. Gansler said the learning event, held in a retreat-like setting, allows teachers to be immersed in an in-depth study and offers three Continuing Education Units (CEUs). Teachers have found the Institute valuable in connecting back to their work in the classroom, some even creating video and multi-media projects that support later teaching initiatives.

A specialized language and literacy course during the Institute was customized each year for the project teachers. In designing and customizing its trainings for LIGHT center teachers, Quality Assist used, among other things, the PPVT and PALS<sup>1</sup> language and literacy assessments from the project classrooms. For example, when it was revealed that rhyming was ranked low across classrooms, a training focused on rhyming was developed and coaches worked with the teachers on the concept.

"Teachers give testimonies about some of the experiences at the Institute," said Gansler. "They come to the end of the week and report that it was a life-changing experience. One teacher said that she had never realized the impact she had on children in her classroom."

The Quality Assist five-hour trainings were also fertile ground for teacher professional growth. Wanda Muhammad, Quality Assist's Professional Development Manager, remembers a training that focused on parent involvement and the influences of

parents' jobs, language, heritage and family issues.

"This particular training was one of the best I can remember," said Muhammad. "There were several Spanish-speaking teachers in the group and they did a wonderful job of explaining their culture versus mainstream U.S. culture in terms of education and the classroom. Some of the other teachers began to have 'aha!' moments about prior experiences with parents as the Latina teachers explained their cultural beliefs and how parents react to certain situations."

"We believe if teachers are going to make changes in their practice, they have to be able to talk about their values," said Muhammad.

"In addition to the trainings, coaching makes a difference in implementing new ideas. Without coaching, teachers are barely keeping their heads above water. When coaches are coming into the classroom, the teachers feel more committed to the ideas from their courses."

## **Multiple Strategies, Multiple Delivery Methods**

Additional training opportunities for teachers came in the form of workshops and Community Resource Literacy Labs. Coaches assisted teachers in selecting which learning events to attend, based on their individual goals. The workshops and labs were developed by Angelle Cooper, United Way Professional Development Manager. In addition, special "theme box" workshops were organized and presented by the literacy coaches around specific OWL curriculum units.

Among the 11 workshop titles were The Power of Play, Discovering Science Through Play, and Mix It Up! Using Centers and Small Groups to build Children's Literacy Skills. Labs were created around destinations in the community where conversations with children could be extended at existing community resources, such as the Georgia Aquarium, Zoo Atlanta and Wonderland Gardens. Additional workshops, such as Rhyme Time, coordinated with trainings offered by either Quality Assist or Mercer University.

"Extending Conversations With Children" also became the theme for the fourth annual Early Literacy Symposium in the spring of 2011. A high-quality professional development opportunity, the two-day symposium offered national speakers and a variety of workshops. Utilizing talent developed in the ERF projects, some workshop presenters have been coaches and teachers from LIGHT.

Aida Pagan, a teacher at one of the LIGHT centers, was part of the professional development efforts for the three years of the grant. She has an Associate's degree in early childhood education from West Florida College and became a lead teacher in Georgia in 2007. "I learned in college, but I learned more in the trainings, especially from Dr. Davis, especially in the course about language delays. I loved the Symposiums, with the book resources and the choice of workshops. You wanted to attend them all if you could."

An early discovery by the LIGHT project staff was that the OWL curriculum required a large number of teacher-made materials for small group and center activities that were time-consuming to make. Quality Assist designed and prepared supplemental curriculum kits for six OWL units, including songs, wordplay and letters, and transition activities. Instruction cards and reusable materials were part of the packaged kit, too. Teachers were able to spend valuable time

teaching the units instead of making materials.

"Early childhood teachers have a great need for information about best practices in early language and literacy instruction," said Gansler. "Most teachers in these projects had not received any of this information before participating in Early Reading First. The multiple strategies for professional development in the LIGHT project were definitely beneficial."

Coaches and project staff working with the teachers agree that professional development for early educators is a valuable investment.

"We need more projects like this in all areas of preschool teaching. Teachers are scrambling for this kind of professional development support," says McWethy. Gansler agrees, "I hope there is a way Early Reading First projects continue in some fashion. They are serving a population of teachers that won't get supported in any other way. The effects last for years."



# A Professional Learning Community of Literacy Coaches: Coaching the Coach

A focus on an innovative professional development structure.

Kleenex or facial tissue? Language has a way of developing on its own, without any rules. Even in academia. Pop culture, buzzwords, trend setting movements – all help shape the terminology and slang words we adopt and use, then sometimes throw away. That’s how, in some circles, the term “professional learning community” became a generic coverall for any number of similar endeavors.

Most educators have an idea of what a professional learning community should be, but may not have been involved in one. The term has been used to describe so many entities – from a grade-level teaching team to a huge national professional organization. Enter the purists, like Jan Miller Burkins, Ed. D., literacy consultant, author and former teacher.

“A professional learning community is a group of people who are invested in the learning of each other, with ownership of the learning they participate in,” said Burkins. “It’s less about training and more about setting up an environment to support folks. And it evolves over time. When you come together, you know you are among colleagues who will push you and will take care of you.”

Burkins took on the challenge of helping to form a Professional Learning Community (PLC) among literacy coaches in the Early Reading First grant projects of United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, starting in late 2009. She had previously provided a one-day session of professional development for the coaches, and the staff felt she was right on target as an experienced coach already familiar with early childhood education.

The timing was perfect. The initial United Way Early Reading First grant project, READERS, was beginning to phase out as the LIGHT and APPLE projects were ramping up, so coaches from all three joined the new PLC. Almost all of the coaches held master’s degrees in literacy or early education, but none had received specialized training to be a teacher coach.

Literacy Coach Elizabeth Clarkson recalls that, with the PLC, the coaches were able to focus on their jobs from a whole new perspective. Previously, coaches held staff meetings and discussed their work with various early learning centers, but there

was no overall framework for their discussions. “The difference with the PLC was that we were this group of people who now had a dedicated time to meet and a professional facilitator. It brought us away from the day to day details and out of ‘survival mode’ long enough to focus on what coaching was in general. We were able to look at the big picture and how our actions aligned with the goals of the project.”

Clarkson was quick to point out that the PLC meetings were not a “staff meeting.” The process helped coaches reflect, share ideas, share documents and approach their work in a more uniform way. “This gave me a forward perspective, versus having my head down in my own project. For the first time, we had a shared language and shared aspects of work, even though we continued to work independently in the centers to which we were attached as coaches.”

Burkins noted that, like all PLCs, the literacy coaches’ PLC developed its own “norms” of behavior or ways of working as a group. “The conversations are open, but structured,” says Burkins. “For example, we often will reflect in writing before talking. And everyone is accountable for contributing to the conversation.” Certain common expectations, such as attendance, are “rules” that a group adopts and follows if it is effective.

## Coaching The Coach

What makes a good coach? First, of course, is knowledge of the game. Each of the literacy coaches knew the “game” of early childhood literacy, since, for the most part, they were former teachers and held degrees in a variety of related subjects. But the nuances of coaching another professional – one on one – were yet to be fully explored.

During the first year of Burkins’ work with the LIGHT grant, her professional development plan for the coaches had these goals:

- To support coaches in becoming skilled in scripting lessons and to facilitate their collective development of a protocol around scripting practices.

- To nurture a coaching vocabulary that is sensitive to the dynamics of coach/teacher relationships
- To build capacity within projects so that there are structures in place for sites to support themselves and each other
- To make a connection between our coaching and student learning
- To connect professional learning for coaches (specifically) and for teachers (generally) across the entire year
- To give coaches a collection of tools specific to their work and organized around the needs of their teachers

Starting in October 2009, Burkins met with the coaches as a group on a monthly basis with a focused agenda for a full day of training. “One of the aspects we addressed was the gradual release of responsibility and the coaches’ understanding of the process in terms of empowering teachers,” said Burkins. Literacy Coach Kimberley Hyler, a former preschool and elementary school teacher, said that coaching presented unique challenges. “It was the best of both worlds, still being in the classroom, but a little difficult to restrain yourself from ‘doing’ rather than ‘coaching’ the teacher. I learned to make the transition and developed strong relationships with the teachers and administrators at my center.”

Another important aspect of coaching is using a vocabulary that is sensitive to the dynamics of coach/teacher relationships. In every interaction, there are things that people say (and don’t say) to each other that have consequences for the relationship; choosing words carefully can make a huge difference. “Reading together from the books *The Power of Our Words* and *Choice Words*, we deeply analyzed the ways that language can influence our work,” said Burkins. “I am confident that every coach has become more conscious of the role of language in coaching and most, perhaps all, have consciously changed some of the ways they use language in coaching.”

Among the many “big picture” issues the coaches pondered was a discussion, over several meetings, about making choices in how to spend their time. “We discussed the question of how do you know what to spend your time on,” says Clarkson, “which seems like a simple question until you analyze the demands on a coach in the classroom. For example, does it take too much away from providing a good coaching experience when you spend time on a very specific issue or question about an individual child? Should we focus only on the more sustainable aspects of coaching a teacher?”

**Click here to see a sample of the actual [Reflective Teaching Cycle protocol](#), developed by LIGHT coaches and the United Way Metropolitan Atlanta Professional Learning Community. This protocol was used by an early childhood teacher during the project; identifying details have been changed.**

In the series of PLC sessions during the school year, Burkins also helped the coaches develop a protocol, or a step-by-step plan, for elements of coaching such as a teacher observation conference, looking at student work and use of language with teachers. “The protocols are broad enough so there can be rich conversation, but they are structured enough to provide guidance,” said Burkins. “Protocols help the coaches develop some common routines around their coaching practices.”

The Reflective Teaching Cycle was developed by the group and provides some common routines around coaching teachers in and out of their classrooms. “This was the first collaboratively designed tool for the group,” said Burkins. “The group spent a few months developing the tool and scrutinizing the language. Its use is complex, both in the technical aspects and the people challenges associated with getting everyone aligned to a single instrument. However, the coaches and most of the teachers now understand the tool and the procedure.”

In addition to the meetings of the PLC group, the coaches received individual attention from their “super coach.” Burkins spent time working individually with each coach in the classrooms, where both the coach and the classroom teachers benefited from her specialized knowledge. Literacy Coach Kimberley Hyler said the “focused and intentional” coaching had the most impact on her and her ability to guide the classroom teachers.

### **Sustainability of the Professional Learning Community**

In the short term, the benefits of the PLC to both the coaches and the teachers (and their students) were clear. “My considerations were that whatever we did was for the children and anything they struggled with,” said Hyler. “Every

year during the grant project, assessment scores rose at my center and were on level or above level, which is a huge accomplishment. My goals for the teachers and children were met.”

Clarkson looked back at the PLC and reflected on what changed for her and the other coaches. “The coaching culture changed dramatically over the period of the grant. There was a lot more information documented in a way that we all had helped develop. For example, we have a website that has all of our documents and that we can access when out in the field. There is a continuity that didn’t exist before.”

Longer term, Burkins anticipates that the PLC and its effects with the coaches and teachers will be long-lasting. “Everyone has upped the level of investment in their roles and in supporting each other with new ideas. They understand how important and meaningful it can be to have a group of colleagues you can trust to help you improve your professionalism.”

Inevitably, as the coaches looked at ways they would stop working with teachers in the LIGHT project centers, they created ways to gradually transition out of a site. The objective was to leave behind changes in teacher practice that teachers can sustain independently. A shining example of that kind of sustainability is Stephanie Magee, a teacher who was part of the initial United Way Early Reading First project and later worked at a center in the LIGHT project. In between, she worked at a women’s shelter child care center.

“The children in this center had no hope. There was no curriculum structure and there were children in all levels of development,” said Magee. “I went back to what I learned from the DREAM project. I pulled out everything from my toolbox and put it to work. The children responded and began reminding their parents they had to go to Ms. Magee’s class, and that motivated the parents, too.”

Magee represents the many teachers who have been exposed to the elevation of professionalism represented in the Early Reading First projects of United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. Burkins credits United Way with having a unique vision in how it structured the professional development of teachers in its grant projects, especially the PLC. “It takes an organization with real vision to see the value of something like this. You have to have the big picture clearly in mind and then invest in it. It is not as obvious on paper immediately. The way the coaches began to think about sustainability and reflect on practice has created more informed and responsive coaching and teachers who are taking their practice to the next level.”

Burkins says the coaches’ PLC will continue. “A PLC is like a relationship. You progress, but you never finish. At the last session we did, I saw that very powerfully. The coaches set in place a plan for their continued meetings and how they will look. The PLC meetings will remain reflective, collaborative places to think and get feedback.”



# Transition to Kindergarten: KinderCamp!

A focus on the innovative transition program for rising kindergartners.

Kindergarten. It's a scary word to some. The time has come for little ones to get on the bus with the big kids, navigate their way in a strange building and sit still in a classroom. No wonder there are tears and anguish on the first day. And that's just the parents.

Humor aside, kindergarten does pose a formidable challenge for children and parents, especially those who have language barriers or are uncomfortable with "school" for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the parents' own school experience was difficult, or they never finished high school. Maybe limited financial resources prevent them from getting their child all the new clothes and gadgets other children will have. Or they have cultural differences that teachers and administrators may not understand.

Whatever the reason, a large number of children and parents arrive at the first day of kindergarten apprehensive and unprepared for the transition that will take place. Some innovative programs are addressing this issue in creative and practical ways. The new programs are the result of a mutually-beneficial partnership between two major community entities – a metro-based United Way and a city school district.

United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta and Marietta City Schools came together through the efforts of two United Way programs – PACE<sup>iii</sup> and Early Reading First. By strategically leveraging these programs in the school district, United Way was able to impact more than 200 children – and helped set the stage for an ongoing program to benefit many more.

LIGHT was a federally-funded Early Reading First program specific to Cobb County. PACE, also a federally-funded project, draws on the strengths of community-based organizations (e.g. schools, family & social service agencies) to serve as Community Hubs in targeted areas. Community Hub Coordinators and Parent Educators work with parents, community leaders, schools, early learning centers and various partners to support early learning for children birth – 5. Both programs received three-year grants.

PACE programs typically establish school transition teams made up of child care providers, school staff, parents and community partners to develop transition plans and year-long strategies for rising pre-k and kindergarten students. In Marietta, a

Transition Advisory Council supported teachers, parents and children in the kindergarten transition process.

"When we looked ahead to the time when the oldest of the preschoolers in the LIGHT project centers would enter kindergarten, we felt strongly that a strategic transition program would help them adjust. Teachers in the centers were doing all that they could to ensure school readiness, but one aspect they could not provide was familiarity with the elementary school," said Katrina Mitchell, Senior Director, Education, United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. Mitchell was part of the team that designed the LIGHT grant and included transition to kindergarten as one of its main components.

Mitchell noted that United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, in its work in the birth to third grade segment of the educational continuum, has emphasized that the early years are when children acquire crucial sets of skills and behaviors, including social and emotional competence and patterns of engagement in school and learning. "Research and experience teach that the best outcomes for children are achieved when the efforts of early childhood and K-12 systems and educators are aligned," said Mitchell.

## Transition Partnership Develops

United Way developed its LIGHT grant relationships with four early learning centers, which were located in the city of Marietta, and fed into several of the city's eight elementary schools. The subject of a transition program for rising kindergarten children in these centers was initiated with Marietta City Schools by both the United Way LIGHT and PACE project teams in the spring of 2008. Typically, the programs work together to address the early learning needs of young children in Metro Atlanta.

"United Way came to us with the idea of a program that would bridge relationships between early learning center teachers and kindergarten teachers, as well as their students and parents," said Debra Pickett, Ed. D., Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum and Instruction, Marietta City Schools. "This was a prime opportunity for us to develop a program to benefit these young children."

Pickett is credited with being a champion of the program from its very inception. "One of the key elements to the success of the school transition work was the district's commitment from the top down," said Andrea Irvin, Director, PACE. "We had the support of the superintendent and the principals. They saw the long-term benefits that the coordination of school transition efforts would bring to their schools."

Pickett's forward-thinking attitude stems in part from helping lead a school district that is only one of two in metro Atlanta to achieve 100 percent Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2009-10. "The reason the whole project worked so well was the leadership of Dr. Pickett," says Leah Austin, United Way Family Literacy Coordinator at the time. "She was willing to be engaged in the partnership and provided the support that moved people forward."

To kick off the project, Austin set up a quarterly series of meetings between early learning and kindergarten teachers in the Marietta elementary schools to share best practices. The meetings took place during the 2008-09 school year. "They discussed family engagement ideas, student experiences and the whole transition process," said Pickett, "as well as their own professional development. They learned how to better support each other in terms of instruction and networking."

Austin said she focused on getting the right people and creating a strong transition council in the first phase of the project. Parent Educators also created individual School Transition Plans for each child with specific activities that would ease their transition into kindergarten, as well as a booklet, "Let's Go To School! A Guide for Families on Kindergarten Transition."

Joining the project in the fall of 2009, Family Literacy Coordinator Jilo Tisdale saw how the liaison between teachers in early learning centers and public school classrooms was benefiting both sides. "It was successful in that both groups of teachers came away with some 'aha' moments. They didn't fully realize what took place in their respective classrooms until they had this opportunity to meet and network with one another."

During the year, plans for a fall 2009 "KinderCamp" were developed. The camp would be a two-day introduction to school for more than 200 preschoolers and their families.

Cathy Colton, curriculum coordinator at Hickory Hills Elementary School, was on the initial planning team and headed up the Hickory Hills KinderCamp. "United Way did a great job of assisting by guiding and directing the expectations and purpose of the project. All of the kindergarten teachers participated

**Smart Start/United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, in collaboration with the Georgia Department of Education, Georgia PTA, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), Georgia Association on Young Children (GAYC) and Georgia Public Broadcasting partnered to develop "Let's Go to School! A Guide for Families on Kindergarten Transition." This helpful guide serves as a resource for parents and families of young children transitioning to kindergarten.**

because they saw that it would help them break down barriers, overcome parent anxieties and also be of help in creating their class rosters."

Cathy's dogged outreach is credited for the school's record turnout for KinderCamp, drawing nearly every new kindergarten child slated to attend Hickory Hills that fall. Over the hot Georgia summer, she visited every apartment complex in the school's attendance zone, distributing registration forms and then returning to pick up the paperwork from families.

Finally, in the fall of 2009, the first KinderCamp was ready to debut in the Marietta City Schools' elementary schools.

### **Welcome to KinderCamp!**

A "mock" school day for children and an orientation for families were part of day one of the two-day KinderCamp. Bus transportation was provided along the usual routes the children would take in the fall; teachers or volunteer parents rode every bus to be a resource for families and children making the trip for the first time. Translators were provided for the many Spanish-speaking families attending.

Children learned about bus safety, music and art while moving through a schedule that included "calendar time" and a read aloud in a kindergarten classroom. Families heard what to expect and

details about things such as preparing for school, responsibilities and communicating with teachers and administrators. At Hickory Hills, an integrated arts school, families even participated in a dance studio lesson.

On day two, children only attended for breakfast in the cafeteria and classroom time, being introduced to calendar time, math, language arts, science, social studies and the library. They even prepared a journal, "What I Did At School During KinderCamp."

Family surveys following the event were uniformly positive, but feedback from school administrators in the fall proved the ultimate worth of the program. "Principals and teachers reported that the children who attended KinderCamp were empowered and the parents were very comfortable when it came to the first days of kindergarten," said Pickett. "The children emerged as little leaders because they were familiar with the school, the routines and the teachers."

Tisdale said some teachers pointed out that they were well aware, because of past experience, that the potential for these same types of students to have problems or a hard time adjusting was high. Instead, they were confident and took on roles as leaders among their peers. A total of 231 children, and their families, attended the program at seven elementary schools.

Families also felt more connected to the schools as a result of KinderCamp and Colton reported that this ultimately helps the school and its PTA. "Parents are acclimated and connected right off," she said, and that makes them more committed to the school. Two Hickory Hills kindergarten parents who

were part of the program in its first year became volunteers on the next year's planning team.

Sustainability is the new buzzword in grant-funded programs. When the grant funds run out, will the ideas and momentum generated continue to benefit the community? A resounding "yes" is the answer for the transition to kindergarten program in Marietta City Schools. "We started planning the next KinderCamp the day after the first one," said Pickett.

"We learned a lot from the first year and decided that we wanted to take this to the next level," said Pickett. A community event in December of each year will encourage early registration for kindergarten and KinderCamp. The outreach program has expanded to all child care centers and will be held the last week of July every year. Two schools are even expanding the program to three days. The school planning committees, which report to Pickett, are required to include family, early learning and community representatives.

Overall, Irvin says the transition program is a good example of two large-scale organizations coming together with a specific goal in mind and working to make it a success. "United Way provided Marietta City Schools with the tools they needed for fostering effective school transitions with incoming kindergarteners and their families. Effective school transition brings together the early learning programs, schools, families and communities to better coordinate efforts that will prepare children for school success."



# Acknowledgements

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# Endnotes

- i. 80% of youth in the Early Reading First (ERF) grants in Metropolitan Atlanta qualify for free or reduced lunch, far exceeding the state average of 50%.
- ii. Childcare Network #33, Sheltering Arms Cobb Center, Sheltering Arms Mansour Center, Zion Baptist Academy
- iii. PACE is **Partners Advancing Childhood Education**, formerly Early Learning Community Based Partnerships (ELCBP), a school readiness initiative.

# Disclaimer

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In addition, the instructional practices and assessments discussed or shown in these presentations are not intended to mandate, direct or control a State's, local educational agency's, or school's specific instructional content, academic achievement system and assessments, curriculum, or program instruction, so long as the instructional materials and literacy activities meet the Early Reading First statutory requirement of being based on Scientifically Based Reading Research that supports the age-appropriate development of the language and literacy skills described in the Early Reading First statute, and are part of their approved grant application.

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