



BRIGHT SPOTS

WAKE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

It's raining books in Wake County, North Carolina — thanks to the local grade-level reading campaign's spring book drive, which reaped almost 70,000 books for disadvantaged children in communities including Raleigh, Apex, Cary and Garner.

Collecting almost double the target of "40,000 books in four weeks," the drive enabled over 5,400 children to each receive 10 new or gently used children's books. Launched as a strategy for school readiness, Wake County's main focus, the drive provided books to young children to build their literacy skills before they reach kindergarten.

"Our shared goal is to ensure that more children from low-income families have the tools and resources they need to become lifelong readers and learners," says Dawn Dawson, early learning senior director for the Wake County Public Schools, who is one of the community leads for the local GLR campaign, *WAKE Up and Read*.

By providing books to school-age children up to age 12 before the school year ends, the drive also addresses summer reading loss, which, research shows, accounts for a significant portion of the reading achievement gap between more and less economically advantaged children.

One effective strategy to address this is to provide students with books matching their interests and ability, paired with help from adults to comprehend the reading, provided informally at home or in a program, according to research from Richard Allington of the University of Tennessee, James S. Kim of Harvard and Thomas G. White of the University of Virginia.

In Wake County, after books were distributed to public schools, teachers helped students select a variety, including books matching their interests, books they can readily read and "stretch books" they will soon be able to read or need to read.

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Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

The well-publicized book drive also increased the visibility of Wake County's GLR effort and built enthusiasm among the about 25 members of its collaborative coalition, which includes education, business, civic, philanthropic and nonprofit leaders.

"It's one thing to talk about how we want all kids reading at grade level," but the "action around it," is what energizes people, says Dawson. "That common focus and common activity helped pull us together." Dawson credits the drive's success to the engagement of many community partners. "It was so important to build on all of those relationships," says Dawson. "The more people involved, the better."

In addition to coalition members, volunteers included college students, families, teachers and middle-school service groups. They helped collect books, sort them into three age-appropriate groups and transport them to child care centers and schools to distribute.

To publicize the drive, the school district communications department produced a press release. Organizers did media interviews. Partners such as the Marbles Kids Museum sent out book drive information via their mailing list. The local newspaper also printed a large free ad. A book drive "tool kit" in English and Spanish was posted on the campaign's website to make it easy for businesses, schools or other groups to participate.

Creative kick-off events included a "dance-off" between two nimble elementary school principals, which delighted children and families, plus drew media coverage. Admission was a donated book. "It was dancing but it was all about bringing books," says Dawson.

Another popular event was a contest for children to name the *WAKE Up and Read* rooster mascot. (He even tweets!) The winning name, *Ruben*, was announced at a school board meeting.

A Barnes & Noble bookstore also held a kick-off event, with some profits supporting the drive. It featured guest readers from the community, including doctors, police officers and school board members. Even after the official drive, a local concert venue pitched in by requesting book donations from families attending *Frozen*, the opening film of the venue's summer movie series.

"It's been a lot of work," says Dawson. "But it's been worth it to see these books and how many we've collected."

For more information, contact Dawn Dawson at 919-431-7725 or dddawson@wcpss.net.