

Webinar Episode 1:

Georgia Reads Coach Malcolm Mitchell's “Best Practices” Family Engagement & Early Literacy Success for Marietta Schools

Overview

This webinar was hosted by *Georgia Reads*, part of the Georgia Council on Literacy, to showcase effective community partnerships that improve early literacy. The featured community was *Marietta City Schools*, in partnership with *Wellstar Health System*.

Moderator: **Malcolm Mitchell**, Georgia Reads Coach (and former NFL player)

Panelists:

- **Dr. Grant Rivera**, Superintendent, Marietta City Schools
 - **Lisa Liedke**, Manager, Pediatric Literacy Program “Small Talk,” Wellstar Health System
 - **Scott Johnson**, Chairman, Georgia Council on Literacy
-

Purpose of the Series

The *Georgia Reads Best Practice Webinars* highlight how communities integrate literacy work across schools, healthcare, and local organizations.

- Goal: Share models other districts can replicate.
 - Focus: “Family engagement and early literacy success.”
 - Approach: Informal discussion—no slides, just shared experiences.
-

Key Messages

1. Literacy as a Unifying Statewide Mission

- Georgia Reads’ goal is to unify fragmented literacy efforts statewide.
 - Literacy is linked to lifelong success — economic mobility, health outcomes, and overall well-being.
 - Fewer than 40% of Georgia’s students read on grade level by 4th grade.
 - Communities must create systems to reverse this trend through early, collaborative intervention.
-

Marietta City Schools Approach (Dr. Grant Rivera)

Challenges Identified

1. **Starting too late:**
 - Efforts began at kindergarten—already behind the curve.
 - Kindergarten readiness is the best predictor of 3rd-grade reading success.
2. **Fragmented literacy instruction:**
 - No unified approach across K-5 classrooms; inconsistent pedagogy between “balanced” and “structured” literacy methods.
3. **Lack of metacognitive strategy:**
 - Students learned to read but not how to *think* about reading.
 - Needed to teach self-strategies for decoding and comprehension.

Solutions & Shifts

- **Backmap the system:** Partner with pre-K providers and healthcare to reach families before kindergarten.
- **Unified literacy framework:** Develop districtwide consistency in reading instruction and teacher training.
- **Student metacognition:** Teach children how to learn and self-correct; move beyond rote reading.

Results

- Schools with literacy focus saw dramatic drops (up to 300%) in student discipline incidents.
- Reading improvements correlated with better attendance, engagement, and overall academic performance.

Wellstar Health System’s Role (Lisa Liedke)

Small Talk Program

- Embeds *language nutrition* education within healthcare — from prenatal to pediatric stages.
- Implemented in OBGYN, NICU, mother-baby units, and pediatric offices.
- Goal: Equip parents and healthcare staff with tools to nurture early brain development through communication and reading.

Why Healthcare Matters

- Healthcare providers are *the most trusted voices* for families before school begins.
- Wellstar’s *Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA)* identified education as a key social determinant of health.
- Addressing literacy reduces later issues in employment, health, and housing stability.

Philosophy

- Reading should be seen as *joy and connection*, not as work.
- Families need consistent, supportive messages about literacy at every touchpoint.

- Focus on scalability: 11 hospitals across Georgia implementing this model.
-

Language Nutrition Explained

- Just as food nourishes the body, *words* nourish the developing brain.
 - Frequent, rich conversation builds neural connections that enable reading and comprehension later.
 - Starts before birth — auditory pathways develop in the third trimester.
 - The more “word nutrition” a child receives early, the better their cognitive and literacy outcomes.
-

Partnership Impact

- Collaboration between Marietta City Schools and Wellstar is viewed as a *model of community alignment*.
 - Emphasis on breaking down silos between education and healthcare.
 - Families receive consistent literacy support from pregnancy through elementary school.
 - The partnership inspired similar models in other Georgia communities (e.g., Augusta, Lamar County).
-

Key Takeaways

1. **Start early:** Prenatal through pre-K is critical; K-12 interventions are often too late.
 2. **Unify systems:** Schools, healthcare, and communities must work together as a literacy ecosystem.
 3. **Empower families:** Equip parents as the child’s first teachers.
 4. **Teach strategy, not just content:** Build children’s ability to think, reflect, and self-correct while reading.
 5. **Replicate success:** Best practices must be shared statewide to scale impact.
-

Closing Thoughts

- Literacy transformation is not about programs—it’s about *partnerships*.
- Every sector has a role to play in ensuring children enter school ready to learn.
- Georgia Reads continues to spotlight model communities monthly to inspire replication and innovation across the state.