

Webinar Episode 2:

Strengthening Community Collaboration to Support Literacy and Student Success

Overview

This webinar was hosted by *Georgia Reads*, part of the Georgia Council on Literacy, to showcase effective community collaboration that improve literacy goals. The featured community was *RISE Atlanta*, in partnership with *CSRA RESA* and *Augusta Public School*.

Host: **Malcolm Mitchell**, Georgia Reads Coach

Panelists:

- **Laurie Cook** – Executive Director, RISE Augusta
- **Dr. Debbie Alexander** – Executive Director, CSRA RESA
- **Dr. Gregory Shields** – Principal (formerly Hornsby Elementary)

Theme: “*Strengthening Community Collaboration to Support Literacy and Student Success*”

Purpose: To showcase how RISE Augusta and local partners collaborate to improve literacy outcomes across Georgia communities.

Key Discussion Highlights

1. Opening Context

- Scott Johnson (Chairman) and Malcolm Mitchell introduce the series and celebrate RISE Augusta as a 2025 Georgia Reads Award winner.
- The series spotlights communities creating measurable literacy impact through collaboration.

2. What Literacy Means

Each panelist defines literacy beyond reading and writing:

- **Laurie Cook:** Literacy equals *opportunity and freedom*—the bridge between poverty and potential.
- **Dr. Alexander:** Literacy is a *window and door to the world*, expanding empathy, imagination, and life chances.
- **Dr. Shields:** Literacy builds *confidence, communication, and critical thinking*—the foundation for future success.

- **Malcolm Mitchell:** Adds that *cultural connection* and motivation are key to literacy engagement.
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3. Core Barriers to Literacy

Panelists identify systemic and community challenges:

- **Home & Parent Engagement:** Reading must start at home; parents are a child's *first teacher*.
 - **Access & Exposure:** Students need books and reading opportunities in schools, homes, and public spaces.
 - **Teacher Shortages & Training:** Many new educators lack foundational reading instruction skills.
 - **Poverty & Family Stress:** Socioeconomic pressures and trauma affect attendance, focus, and parental involvement.
 - **Technology Distraction:** Screens replace reading and interpersonal development.
 - **Attendance Crisis:** Chronic absenteeism directly harms reading progress.
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4. Collaborative Solutions

RISE Augusta's model focuses on *shared responsibility and sustained partnership*:

- **Community Foundation of CSRA** united schools, nonprofits, and businesses around literacy as a "big-picture" goal.
 - Partnerships provide tutoring, wraparound supports, and consistent funding with data accountability.
 - **Churches, hospitals, and businesses** have joined literacy initiatives like "Read-to-Me" programs for new parents.
 - **RESA's Role:** Acts as a hub connecting districts, training educators, and aligning resources.
 - **Schools:** Build trust with community partners by being transparent about student needs (e.g., hunger, clothing, emotional health).
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5. Impact and Lessons

- Collaboration changes both student outcomes and school culture.
 - Transparency builds credibility and long-term investment.
 - Integrating literacy into every organizational mission—education, business, or civic—creates sustainability.
 - Literacy initiatives succeed when communities see them as *shared work*.
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6. Closing Messages

Each panelist offers a takeaway:

- **Dr. Shields:** “Literacy is everyone’s responsibility.”
- **Dr. Alexander:** “Embed literacy into every plan, budget, and goal—it must outlast any one program or leader.”
- **Laurie Cook:** “This isn’t just an education issue. The entire community must invest in literacy to ensure opportunity for all.”
- **Malcolm Mitchell:** “Reading success is a marathon. Progress requires time, consistency, and collaboration.”

Tone & Takeaway

This webinar showcases RISE Augusta as a *model for collective literacy leadership*. The conversation underscores that improving literacy isn’t a school problem—it’s a **community movement** that thrives on shared purpose, transparency, and long-term commitment.