

Webinar Episode 3:

Leveraging L4GA for Strong, Sustained Community Literacy Partnerships

Overview

This webinar, hosted by the Georgia Council on Literacy and Georgia Reads, is the third edition of the Best Practices Webinar series and features leaders from **Lamar County**, a **2025 Georgia Reads Award winner**. The discussion highlights how Lamar County leveraged the L4GA grant to build strong, sustained, multi-sector community literacy partnerships.

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

Panelists:

- **Andrea Scandrett, PhD** – Director of Teaching and Learning, Lamar County Schools
- **Amy Christopher, Ed.S.** – Learning Support Specialist, Lamar County Schools

Theme: *“Leveraging L4GA for Strong, Sustained Community Literacy Partnerships”*

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

Lamar County Context and Literacy Vision

Lamar County is a small, rural town (Barnesville, Georgia) with a high rate of poverty, where 100% of its four schools (primary, elementary, middle, high school) are free and reduced, and the high school is 91% free and reduced.

- **Initial Challenge:** Lamar County was initially designated a **"language desert"** by the Rollins Center and Cox Campus due to pre-K students having the receptive and spoken vocabulary of a 2.5 to 3 year old.
- **Literacy Defined:** For Lamar County, literacy means having well-read students ready for school and life, capable of contributing to the community, and breaking the cycle of poverty.
- **The L4GA Grant:** The L4GA (Literacy for Learning, Living, and Leading in Georgia) grant, won in 2017 and again for a second round, provided **\$1.2 million** for a four-year period. The grant helped address the lack of bookstores and the limited accessibility of the community library in the rural area.

Key Shifts and Successful Partnerships

The first major shift noticed after receiving the L4GA resources was a **mindset shift** away from working in silos, recognizing that literacy is a whole community-wide issue, not just a school issue.

1. Non-Traditional Partners and the "Hub"

The strategy involved reaching out to non-traditional partners to create a **"whole child literacy ecosystem"**.

- **Starting Point:** The recommended first partnership for any district starting from scratch is the **Family Connections Collaborative**, which acts as the **hub** of community resources and connects the school system with the health department, housing authorities, and others. The second recommended partner is the **library**.
- **Two-Way Street:** Initial conversations with partners like the Health Department and Gordon State College were easy as they were already willing to help and were asked, "We need your help and how can we help you?"
- **Health Department:** The partnership addressed the community's low birth weight issues. Initiatives included providing **"Talk With Me Baby"** classes, placing a **reading nook** with books (including parent books) that families could take home, and incorporating **registration for First Readers** (a program mailing free books to children until age five) into WIC paperwork.

2. Daycare Providers and Relentless Effort

The partnership with daycare providers was the **most difficult** to start because providers were initially leery, assuming the school staff were state inspectors.

- **Strategy:** The school system-built trust through **relentless effort**:
 - Continuously sending out flyers.
 - Hosting literacy, math, and science of reading **daycare trainings**.
 - Providing **incentives** for participation, including a **\$125 stipend**, meals, and paid registration for state training.
 - Sharing photos and successes on social media.
- **Focus on Early Learning:** This group was a crucial focus because the bulk of **brain development occurs before age five**, and daycare providers are the first teachers outside of the home. The school system shifted focus to providers after struggling to get parents to attend parent literacy courses. The goal was to train daycare teachers to help students be ready to learn by the time they entered the Lamar County school system.

Sustaining Momentum and Cultural Shift

Lamar County achieved a **50% increase in event attendance** over four years and saw library checkouts jump from 15,000 to 25,000. The strategy for sustainability focused on making literacy **fun** and accessible outside of the school building.

- **Community Events:**
 - **Trick or Read:** An annual event where staff hands out books in front of the library on the main street during the downtown trick-or-treating event.
 - **Book Tasting Event:** A progressive dinner involving downtown restaurants, where each restaurant themed a genre of book. Families listened to the book, got a food sample, and entered drawings for prizes. This event saw over 200 participants.
 - **Read Sunday:** Books were taken to local churches for distribution and reading, with churches posting photos on social media.
 - **Highlighting Literacy:**
 - **Read Lamar Posters:** High school students (including athletes, JROTC, and the homecoming queen) were photographed with books for posters and billboards around the community. This was done to elevate reading to the "highest pedestal" alongside athletics.
 - **Reading Nooks:** Fun, non-assignment reading spaces (like tepees) were placed in non-traditional locations such as pharmacies, community centers, the health department, and the housing authority.
 - **YouTube Channel:** Videos featuring staff (including principals, assistant principals, and community leaders like the fire chief and police chief) reading aloud were shared to encourage reading outside of school hours, especially during breaks.
 - **Professional Development:** Sustaining the work involved investing heavily in adults, providing teachers with access to workshops, conferences, speakers, and endorsements (reading, gifted).
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Closing Message

A truly literate community is one where **reading, writing, and listening happen across all ages and all settings**. Literacy is a **shared responsibility** and a continuous effort that happens all the time, not just during the 180 school days. This active, persistent engagement is what has made Lamar County successful.