

Life Cycle of a Coalition

There are two types of coalitions:

- **Informal** – An Informal coalition involves a lead organization or person deliberately reaching out to various stakeholder groups and building policy, sharing information or contacts, usually includes a perceived consensus among the participants. That could include ad hoc task forces, or information-sharing networks.
- **Formal** – A formal coalition involves people and organizations banding together to develop common ground and influence policy under a formalized structure of some sort. This includes legally recognized associations or federations, coordinated advocacy coalition (like Voices for Children), and collaborative multi- sector groups like United Way's Success By 6®.

Which type should you be considering to mobilize the community around early grade reading? Experts advise adopting the structure with the least formality necessary to get the job done!

Whichever type of coalition you choose, an early grade reading coalition is built in stages. Each stage looks a little different.

- **Stage 1 – Build the Nucleus**

Early on, you'll want to align with organizations that share your United Way's concern for giving every child a good educational opportunity. This is the core of the coalition. (It might already exist, as we'll explore in a bit.)

If you're already involved in education impact work, you may already be part of such a coalition, or have education partners in place. If you're new to the issue, it may take a little longer. Either way, think broadly about who should be in the conversation at this stage. (You'll find a checklist to spark your thinking below.)

At this stage, the coalition is often focused on elevating the cause, educating the public, and engaging the rank-and-file of the coalition's members. These outreach and [public awareness](#) effort are the foundation for later action. Remember, political consultants and community organizers use the formula of "identify, educate, persuade and activate." It's important to build a layer of public education and awareness before you call people to action around a few concrete strategies.

- **Stage 2 – Co-Create Strategies to Boost Early Grade Reading**

As you're elevating the issue together, you should also be working with your coalition and others to develop [strategies](#) to improve reading. Of course, organizations representing educators, parents, faith leaders, and business leaders should be part of the mix. Agencies (not just United Way-funded) that deal with young and school-aged children should be in this conversation. Ask

yourself: who could help us think more deeply about this issue, from different viewpoints of the early grade reading issue? Are libraries, universities, community colleges and literacy councils involved? The more perspectives, the better the outcome.

When your strategies to boost early grade reading are fully developed, you can begin to shift your messaging and coalition-building to organize around and spell out the solution strategies, not just the cause.

- **Stage 3 – Build Momentum Around Solutions**

Focusing on the strategies that could make a difference in your community can create a new level of enthusiasm and excitement in the community, and brings new coalition members to the cause. Public opinion polling shows that people want to be part of the solution, and want to have actions to take that are meaningful. Whatever your strategies end up being, there will likely be a Give, Advocate and Volunteer call to action that can advance those strategies.

And it informs who else needs to be at the table. If your coalition decides, for example, that a key strategy is helping struggling readers, you may decide that recruiting and training literacy volunteers to work in K-3 classrooms in high-risk elementary schools. Think about the volunteer component – what other coalition members might that suggest? In many communities, retirees are a strong volunteer force. Think about retired teachers and state employees (usually there are state and local organizations that are subsets of state employee and education associations), SCORE (Senior Core of Retired Executives), other retired professionals, AARP, Experience Corps, grandparent networks, local senior citizens' centers and retirement communities. These groups might not be thinking about early literacy, but they may be looking for more meaningful volunteer opportunities – and may be open to recruiting their members as volunteer readers.

And, of course, your corporate partners are prime candidates for launching an effort to recruit community residents who work in these companies to be tutors and mentors. Think about including these companies in your coalitions.

Look at your coalition through the lens of your solution strategies. Ask these questions: Who else could help make this happen? Who would join us if they knew we needed them?

- **Stage 4 – Grow and Sustain**

Like any other constituency, your coalition members need to be asked, thanked and informed. Individual members of the coalition organizations need to be engaged, through regular updates and calls to action. Coalition members may not want to share email databases. That's OK, but it is important to send individuals a coordinated message, whether that's through a coalition e-newsletter or whether each organization uses existing vehicles to get the word out.