

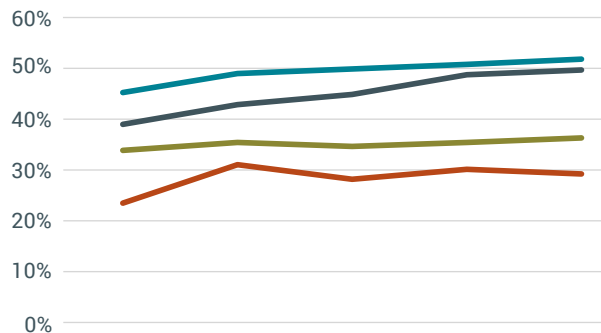
Case Study Brief

# Lessons from Community Action on Childhood Literacy

## Launching a Community based Literacy Campaign in DNATL

When the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Initiative launched in Del Norte and Tribal Lands in 2010, 66% of children entering kindergarten in Del Norte and Tribal Lands (DNATL) did not have the skills needed to succeed by 3rd grade, resulting in 50% of 3rd graders not reading at the appropriate level, according to the results of comprehensive state exams. With the help of the DNATL BHC Initiative, a coalition of families, educators, early child care providers, local business owners, and agencies came together to improve literacy among children. The coalition made a collective commitment to ensure that all children in DNATL had the skills they needed to be ready for kindergarten and read at grade level by grade. This case study on DNATL's 3Read23 Campaign demonstrates the power of a community-wide approach to addressing childhood literacy, and examines how policy makers and grant funders can support community-led efforts in rural communities to plan and implement systems change within the education sector.

Percent of Students Meeting/Exceeding the grade-Level Standard English Language Arts



	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
CA 3rd Graders	38%	42%	44%	48%	49%
CA All Graders	44%	48%	49%	50%	51%
Del Norte 3rd Graders	23%	31%	28%	30%	29%
Del Norte All Graders	33%	35%	34%	35%	36%

Source: California Department of Education

## People Power

The Core Design Team<sup>1</sup> convened as part of the BHC Initiative felt that engaging as much of the community as possible—both to elevate the urgency of the problem and also to understand root causes that better inform solutions—was the necessary first step. Initial outreach and empathy interviews<sup>2</sup> with parents and educators helped identify the underlying issues:



- Parents didn't understand what Kindergarten readiness was, and how it could impact a child's life well into adulthood.
- Parents felt isolated and lacked networks of support and resources
- Educators needed more professional development and support to meet kids' needs in Del Norte—particularly those with special needs, challenging behaviors and trauma.
- There were not enough preschool slots available to community members.
- Stress at home, time, poverty, and feeling judged in school settings were preventing committed parents from being more involved in their child's education.
- There was too much focus on prevention of unwanted behaviors and not enough on literacy because the community did not understand the connection between the two<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The original Core Design Team consisted of non-profit leaders, educators and administrators, and business and community leaders.

<sup>2</sup> "The focus of empathy research methods is listening to understand, which involves deferring any opinions or judgments, listening to someone's whole story, and taking the time to understand both the story and context that they bring to the surface, but also their thoughts and feelings below the surface. From these insights, a vivid picture can be developed that articulates the lived experience for the person being interviewed." ThinkPlace 2017

<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that children who attain good literacy skills early are less likely to engage in harmful behaviors as teenagers and into adulthood. Citation: Strickland, D. S. & Barnett, S. (2003)

Armed with these insights, community stakeholders were prepared to elevate the issue and create broad action, which inspired the Literacy Symposium. This event brought together 200 community members, including business owners, childcare providers, educators and administrators, parents and other community leaders. Together, they created the 3Read23 Campaign, so named for the coalition's primary goal: that by the year 2023, 100% of DNATL's kids would be reading at grade level in 3rd grade. Local governments—including tribal councils—school districts and community partners all committed to the goals of the 3Read23 Campaign.

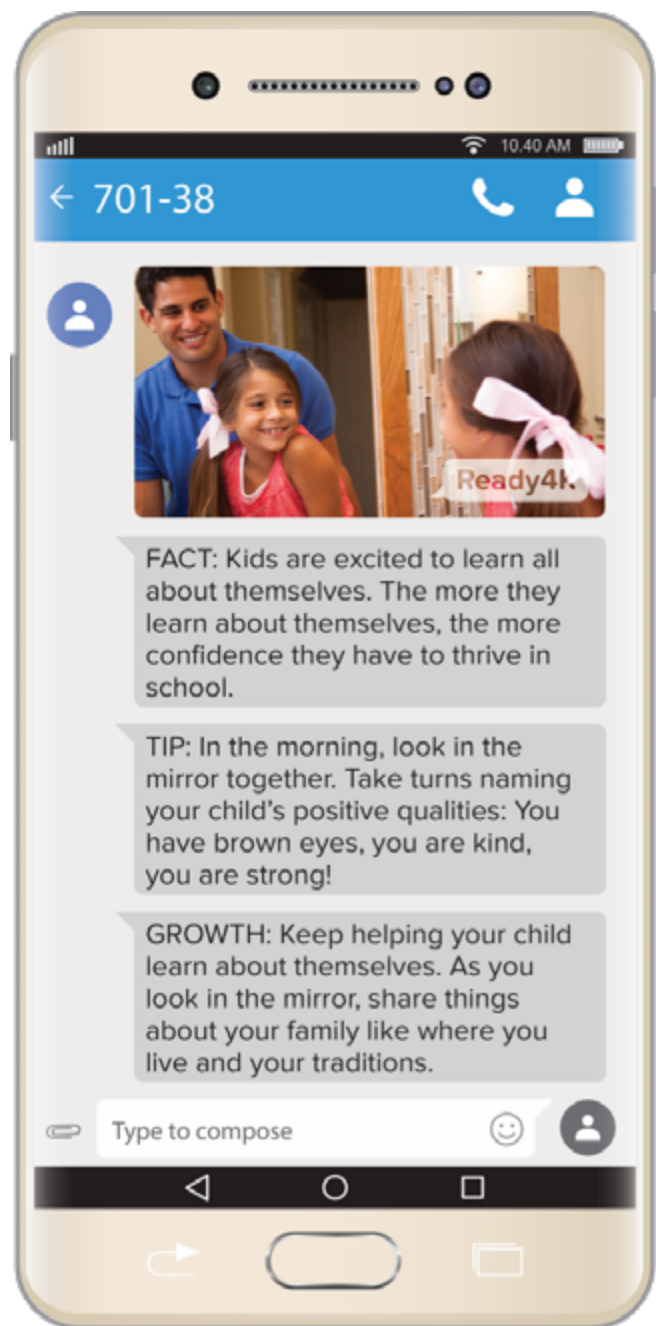
**As a result of the 3Read23 Campaign, quality child care improved from 33% to 66% and kindergarten readiness improved from 33% to 44% by the end of 2016.**

Many community members taking actions, large and small, to support the goal created a sea change. Books began to show up in the grocery stores, at the bowling alley, and in restaurants. Healthcare providers gave children books when they came in for health child visits. Organizations and advocates began to partner to take on the missing links in the DNATL literacy support landscape.

### Collaboration and Policy Innovation

As a result of the awareness raised through the Literacy Symposium and the 3Read23 Campaign, community members worked together to tackle issues related to kindergarten readiness and literacy:

- ▶ The UnHomework Initiative called for replacing lengthy homework assignments with experiential activities that encouraged quality family time. Teachers and parents reported that the new approach succeeded in reducing parents' stress and allowing for more family connections around learning.
- ▶ In partnership with local food security programs, Del Norte Unified School District implemented the "Breakfast After the Bell" program, which led to a substantial increase (From 20-23% to 80-90%) in students eating breakfast. Teachers who participated in this program observed that their students became calmer, with fewer nurse visits and less anxiety, which resulted in increased concentration.



### Leveraging Partnerships

Members of the campaign were able to bring in additional resources to support their goal of getting all kids reading at grade level. An example is the Dolly Parton Imagination Library which was secured by the campaign. The library is currently providing books to half of the eligible population in DNATL (709 children). Another example is the Texting 0-5 program, spearheaded by First 5 Del Norte and funded by county Mental Health services. With help from other service providers and organizations working on early childhood development, these text alerts provide parenting tips and information about accessing resources, customized to the DNATL community.

A key challenge to overcome in order to improve literacy outcomes was connecting educators to continuing education opportunities and the support they needed to be as effective as possible. Progress on this is due largely to the early childhood education (ECE) certificate program now in place at College of the Redwoods. Through funding from First 5 California, Quality Counts Del Norte offers resources and training opportunities related to the state-wide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The goal is to raise the quality of all early childhood programs, including center-based preschools, family child care providers, and playgroups at the Family Resource Center.

## Changing the Narrative

Working empathetically to understand parents' constraints to better literacy practices helped the initiative's stakeholders identify and pursue more effective strategies. A powerful narrative change shifted the way stakeholders viewed struggling families by identifying them on a pathway towards a thriving family life. The spectrum indicates that families are not permanently stuck in one category, but can evolve from one end of the spectrum to another. To better diagnose family needs, the 3Read23 team created five categories describing the home lives and how they relate to literacy outcomes.

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**Directed:** Caregivers/families who knew the importance of education, could advocate for their children, and knew how to work around the system to fill gaps to help their children succeed.

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**Practical:** Caregivers/families who knew how the system worked and knew how to keep their children safe.

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**Getting By:** Families who valued education, but were time poor and not confident about how to support their children or engage with the school.

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**Struggling:** Parents and caregivers who had struggled when they were in school and still distrusted schools, yet wanted their children to have a different experience with school but did not know how to make it happen.

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**Drowning:** Those families who were "drowning" were generally overwhelmed by trauma, mental illness, and drugs and alcohol that likely contributed to their lack of engagement.

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Another critical change was that professional development opportunities created by the program shifted the way preschool teachers saw their roles—from thinking of themselves as babysitters to seeing themselves as part of a continuum of educators. The 3Read23 Campaign work has already made a significant difference in supporting preschool teachers to understand and value their critical importance in education.

This important work to advance education in Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal lands demonstrates the transformative power of empathy-based work, cross-sector collaboration, community engagement, and the right partnerships to address entrenched and systemic problems. Continued evaluation and data tracking, community outreach and capacity building will be needed to ensure that the project reaches its goal in the next few years.