



Reading at Full Blast

THE LEARNING ALLIANCE'S MOONSHOT MOMENT IS SERVING AS A BOOSTER FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LITERACY LEVELS

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIM BOTTALICO

Madalyn works with third grade teacher Noelle Grantham during a reading period that includes a section on space. Anthony and Zuri look on.



“Do you mean the goal or the puppet?” says Barbara Hammond, CEO of The Learning Alliance, when asked recently to explain what Moonshot is all about.

Moonshot the puppet is a happy, hairy, blue mascot in a far-out vest and a ballcap adorned with a rocket, who shows up in schools and stars in videos demonstrating ways parents and other educators can “read, talk, sing, play, create” (it’s a song) with their young children every day.

That’s more than just child’s play, and the Moonshot Moment is both less tangible than its puppet mascot and more ambitious. At the time of its inception just over 10 years ago, we told the story of the two mothers, Liz Woody-Remington and Barbara Hammond, accomplished professionals who turned their sons’ struggles in school into an initiative to unite a community around literacy. Also well known is the generosity and commitment of Ray Oglethorpe, Vero Beach resident and retired CEO of AOL, who poured his resources into the mission, enabling the two women to launch The Learning Alliance in 2009.

But what exactly is the Moonshot Moment? At its most basic level, it’s a vision, as ambitious as its space-program namesake, to create a community in which all children “become literate, compassionate, creative citizens who will improve our world.” Bringing that vision down to earth, it becomes a goal: “to get 90 percent of our students reading at grade level by third grade,” first articulated by then-retiring superintendent of schools Fran Adams in 2012.

Third grade is widely accepted as a turning point; common wisdom holds that after third grade, students are expected to “read to learn.” Deficiencies in reading skills at that level begin



Barbara Hammond and Liz Woody-Remington created The Learning Alliance more than 10 years ago to help students with struggles in literacy.

compounding, hindering a child’s ability to succeed, not just in school but also in life.

In 2022, only 53 percent of third-grade students in Florida were reading at level 3 (satisfactory), a level that suggests they may still “need additional support” to be successful in fourth grade. A student reading at level 4 (proficient) is “likely to excel” in the next grade, while a score of 5 (mastery) denotes a student who is “highly likely” to excel.

Students in Indian River County surpassed the state average in 2018,

and progress was trending upward. After losing some ground during the pandemic years, 58 percent of the district’s students are reaching the level 3 mark, and SDIRC has improved its state ranking from 16 to 12.

The Learning Alliance, Hammond explains, “holds the goal” of the Moonshot Moment, uniting the community around a shared vision of literacy. The organization’s 16 employees work in partnership with the school district to promote excellence in teaching, to provide extended learning opportunities to students, to empower families as

Thirty-five students from Citrus Elementary School's third through fifth grade classes enjoy putting on a performance of *Frozen* for friends and family on Riverside Theatre's main stage.



Nora Berry helps direct Citrus Elementary School students during a performance of *Frozen*.

their children's first teachers, and to build an engaged community.

In that last role, TLA serves as the managing partner of MCAN, the Moonshot Community Action Network, a group of 125 community leaders, including representatives from nonprofit organizations, elected officials, members of the school district, and concerned citizens, who meet regularly with the goal of "galvanizing community action" around literacy.

On the ground, Moonshot programs improve teaching and reach struggling students every day. Moonshot Academies are in place at seven of the 13 elementary schools in the district. Struggling students in second and third grade are invited to participate and receive 90 minutes of extended instruction, including skill building and enrichment activities, for three days a week after school



throughout the school year. The programs are led by teachers who receive two days of professional development training each quarter in strategies based in the science of teaching reading.

The programs extend beyond the school year. To prevent “summer slide,” four-week programs for struggling students are run at three different sites and last four hours each day. Nora Berry, an exceptional teacher at Citrus Elementary who teaches in the summer institute, explains that enrichment activities (often provided by community partners such as Vero Beach Museum of Art and Ballet Vero Beach) are combined with skill development and small-group tutoring every day. Student progress is tracked continuously, and a student who wasn’t ready for

fourth grade at the end of the school year can prevent slippage and even close the gap altogether.

Also underway are activities that extend Moonshot programs to older students. Berry recently worked in a Moonshot collaboration with the school, TLA, and Riverside Theatre in which 35 students in third through fifth grade participated in a production of *Frozen*. Berry loves the fact that the program embraces all children. “They don’t come to you with labels,” she says. “We take everybody and get them what they need.”

In the 2021–22 school year, approximately 4,500 students benefited from these directed interventions, and 350 teachers received training. Additionally, pre-K teachers and students are being reached by prevention intervention specialists, 12 elementary schools

have a third grade interventionist embedded on-site, and four campuses now have coaches on-site for teachers of kindergarten through second grade students.

The range of programs and the number of students and teachers served grow every year. In 2020, The Learning Alliance acquired the Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative and began developing Moonshot Families, a program to reach children from birth through their pre-K years. The “Moonshot Rocket” soars through the county bringing enrichment opportunities to people where they live, and a book-mobile makes sure all students have access to books.

One of the most exciting initiatives is the creation of the Moonshot Acceleration School this year at Vero Beach Elementary. The idea is to



At Vero Beach Elementary School, first grade teachers Nicole Benson and Michelle Morell-Vega work with Debbi Arseneaux, educational consultant and teaching artist with The Learning Alliance, planning an arts-integrated reading unit.

create an incubator, or a laboratory school, where ideas can be tested and teaching strategies revised, ultimately creating a hub of teacher training and a model for other schools in our community and beyond. Principal Lyndsey Matheny describes the school as a

“safe space” for brainstorming. “I have the authority,” she says, “to dream up what this could be.”

The school has an “acceleration team” consisting of a coordinator, an interventionist, and two people who work with teachers to oversee collabora-

tive instruction planning. Funding for the program comes from both TLA and the school district.

Matheny describes the work as a “hyper-focused coaching model.” The acceleration team is fully embedded in the school and is in classrooms every day modeling lessons and providing in-the-moment coaching for teachers, delivering on-the-spot, continuous feedback. These teachers’ students are already showing better outcomes than their peers in classrooms without the extra support.

After-school programs at the school have also been expanded to include kindergarten and first grade students in addition to the second and third graders traditionally served by Moonshot Academies. And the students aren’t the only ones staying after school. Moonshot Mondays provide professional development around different topics each week from 3:45 to 5 p.m. Teachers are paid to attend these voluntary sessions, and plans are already underway to expand them to a full week before the beginning of the next school year.

Although still in its first year, results are promising. On the district’s standardized Impact Review Tool, which measures factors such as student engagement, collaborative planning, and feedback, the teachers at Vero Beach Elementary are outperforming their peers across the district in every area.

“Our kindergartners are off the chart with their growth!” says Matheny. Almost 70 percent of them were demonstrating grade-level proficiency with only half a year’s instruction. The expectation is that they will meet the 90 percent goal this year, setting them up well for continued growth.

Matheny describes this as the “incubator” year for the acceleration

Robert gets some individualized instruction from Vero Beach Elementary third grade chair Noelle Grantham.



school, which could become a training hub for the district in the future and a model for schools everywhere. “There’s no replicable place to visit,” she says. “We can become the epicenter of a stand-alone lab school with a public-private partnership.” Indeed, David Moore, SDIRC superintendent of schools, credits this partnership as one of the things that drew him to the district.

The Moonshot Moment is a vision, a goal, a community network, a set of programs and initiatives, a public-private partnership, and a budding national model that has already received 10 Pacesetter Awards from the National Campaign for Grade Level Reading. But to parent Kelli Healy, it’s simpler than all that.

Her daughter, Madalyn, spent her kindergarten year in front of a computer during the pandemic. She struggled with phonics, and by first grade she was coming home from school at Vero Beach Elementary frustrated every day.

When the school reached out to the Healys, Kelli jumped at the chance to enroll Madalyn in Moonshot Academy. Within the first month, she was reading to her parents. “She grew by leaps and bounds,” Healy says, “It was phenomenal.” Healy describes the program as “fun and interactive” and describes how her daughter grew to love learning. “She’s empowered and confident,” Healy adds, “and equipped with an arsenal of tools.”

Madalyn, a third grader now, will graduate from Moonshot this year. She’s reading 400-page chapter books and just tested into the gifted program. “I believe in this program so much,” Healy says. “It needs to be in every school.”

It’s a safe bet that the visionaries at the forefront of the Moonshot Moment won’t stop until it is. 🌟



Zuri works on her reading skills in Noelle Grantham’s third grade class at Vero Beach Elementary.



Kelli Healy enrolled her daughter, Madalyn, in the Moonshot Academy when she was struggling to read in first grade. Madalyn is now in the gifted program in third grade.