Every week, thousands of young Baltimore children bring home high-quality, multicultural children’s books inside a bright red bag. And each week, their families can learn how to best share those books.

“It’s not just about kids bringing home books. We need to make sure families establish an effective home-based literacy routine,” says Rebecca Armstrong of Raising A Reader (RAR), a national nonprofit early literacy and parent engagement program, headquartered in California, with more than 2,700 sites in 34 states.

Based on extensive research documenting parents’ key role in nurturing their child’s educational success by reading to them effectively at home, RAR has reached over 1.25 million children since 1999, primarily by partnering with a community’s school, library or direct service agencies to distribute the books and share best practices with parents.

In Baltimore, partnering with Baltimore City Public Schools and Baltimore City Head Start, RAR’s effort is large, rapidly growing and ambitious. Launched in 2011, RAR served 1,000 Baltimore kindergartners in 14 schools. During the 2014-15 school year, 9,200 pre-kindergartners and kindergartners in 91 schools and 2,600 children in 37 Head Start sites will participate, with over 39,000 books rotating in and out of their homes weekly.

“Our goal is to have Baltimore be a model for other cities that want to elevate their language, literacy and family engagement to the forefront of early childhood education through Raising A Reader,” adds Armstrong, who oversees RAR’s East Coast programs from Baltimore. “We do that with evidence-based programming, outreach and awareness.”

As a result, RAR is involved in other local literacy efforts, including the Baltimore grade-level reading campaign’s Read 15, a summer initiative encouraging children to read at least 15 minutes daily.

“In Baltimore, the GLR campaign has helped us understand what we can do to help build upon other promising early literacy efforts underway,” says Armstrong.
Critical early funding from Target Corporation to start RAR in Baltimore helped secure additional support for expansion, including from two federal education funding streams — an Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) grant (which also funded Phoenix and greater Boston sites) and support from Maryland’s Race To the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant.

It helped to be “vetted by Target,” says Armstrong. “Some corporations’ philanthropy departments are highly trusted and Target is one.” California and Arizona communities also received funding for RAR from Target, which is a lead GLR Campaign co-investor.

To promote family engagement, trained staff at each RAR site offer two to five parent training workshops. Each book bag includes an instructional DVD, available in 15 languages. Families are connected to schools and public libraries.

Workshop attendance is a shared challenge among parent engagement programs. While attendance in the three IAL grant-funded sites was generally below 40 percent during the 2013-14 school year, RAR continues to explore ways to boost attendance. Successful strategies, says Armstrong, include: tying workshops to an activity such as an ice cream social or a performance by children; providing dinner and child care; and offering workshops at varying times.

In partnership with Child Trends, an independent evaluator based in Washington, D.C., RAR is preparing for a large-scale comprehensive evaluation. Previous smaller-scale studies found that participating families increased their home literacy behaviors and children improved their reading skills.

Among these is a Child Trends evaluation of the IAL grant-funded sites, which found statistically significant changes in family reading behaviors critical to language and literacy development. It shows increases in the number of times families shared books together per week, the number of minutes per session and the number of times children requested to be read to.

“Families are developing, practicing and sustaining a home-based literacy routine, especially families that didn’t have one or didn’t recognize the importance of having one,” says Armstrong. “Children are going to be better prepared for reading and their early language and comprehension skills are going to improve.”

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