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Gateway to Skills, Civic Engagement Found in Reading

New NGA Issue Brief Outlines State Support for Reading Initiatives

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WASHINGTON-At a time when the demand for highly literate workers is escalating, rates of literary reading in America are suffering from sharp declines. Fewer than half of adults read literature in their leisure time, according a survey by the National Endowment for the Arts. Rates of reading have been dropping for at least two decades; at the current rate of decline, literary reading will virtually disappear in half a century.

A new issue brief from the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) finds states across the country are actively working to increase reading and participation in literary activities. States have recognized that engaging citizens in these activities yields multiple benefits, such as promoting lifelong learning to improve workforce skills and increasing civic engagement and community identity. The brief, [State Efforts to Promote Reading and Literary Activities](#), provides a variety of policies and programs states can use to enhance the individual and community benefits of reading.

To meet the increasingly important demands of a knowledge-based economy, workers proficient in reading, writing, problem solving and creative thinking are essential. The brief suggests these skills are required for most of today's high-growth jobs. Anticipating such needs, some states invest in reading programs that use literature to enhance productivity and help professionals address complex workplace issues. For example, companies in **Kansas** and **Wyoming** can participate in forums that use short works of fiction to help their employees-ranging from lawyers to county workers to accountants-contend with issues such as ethical business practices, risk and common professional dilemmas. Similarly, **Maine's** award-winning Literature and Medicine program has been utilized by numerous hospitals and community health facilities to improve the quality of patient care.;

"Governors can do much to create a culture of readers and stress the importance of lifelong learning," said John Thomasian, NGA Center Director. "Further, governors understand the benefits state economies gain by encouraging analytical and creative thinking."

Reading and literary activities also offer civic benefits to states and communities. Research indicates that readers are more likely to vote, volunteer and actively engage in community life.; States can take advantage of these corollary benefits through programs that engage citizens and create opportunities for literary involvement and appreciation. Examples include **Michigan's** Arts and Libraries Community Literary Partnership Program, a literary heritage program in **South Carolina** that supports author visits to the state's low-income regions and **Louisiana's** Readings in Literacy and Culture, which enrolled nearly 80,000 readers from almost every parish across the state.

State Efforts to Promote Reading and Literary Activities outlines a number of existing state resources and funding streams-including arts and humanities councils, state offices of tourism, workforce development departments, literary centers, health departments and state libraries-and the innovative ways states have engaged them to encourage literary activities. It is the fifth in a series of issue briefs documenting how the arts can help states achieve economic development goals. The series is produced by the NGA Center, with cooperative agreement funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and research assistance from the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA).

"More than reading is at stake," said Dana Gioia, Chairman of the Arts Endowment. "As the NEA report, *Reading at Risk*, demonstrates, readers play a more involved role in their communities than non-readers. The decline of reading, therefore, parallels a larger retreat from active participation in civic and cultural life. Advanced literacy is a specific intellectual skill and social habit that depends on both education and frequent practice. As more Americans lose this capability, our nation becomes less informed, active and independent-minded. These are not qualities that a free, innovative or productive society can afford to lose."

"Abundant reading, creative writing and literary activities strengthen states in many ways," said Jonathan Katz, NASAA CEO. "Governors and their staff have great opportunity to draw upon their states' authors, schools, literary organizations and book industries to build a competitive workforce and remind constituents of their state's special contribution to the nation's literary heritage."

The brief concludes, "Policies and programs that support reading-particularly if undertaken on a coordinated statewide level-can leverage...resources and talent to create a culture of reading and community action."

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*The **National Governors Association** (NGA) is the collective voice of the nation's governors and one of Washington, D.C.'s most respected public policy organizations. NGA provides governors with services that range from representing states on Capitol Hill and before the administration, to developing policy reports on innovative state programs and hosting networking seminars for state government executive branch officials. The NGA Center for Best Practices focuses on state innovations and best practices on issues that range from education and health to technology, welfare reform, and the environment.*

*This year, **the National Endowment for the Arts** (NEA) marks its 40th anniversary of leadership in the arts. The NEA is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts-both new and established-bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Arts Endowment is the largest national funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.*

*Founded in 1968, the **National Assembly of State Arts Agencies** (NASAA) is a national source of research on government arts funding and cultural policy at the state level. As the membership organization that serves the nation's state and jurisdictional arts agencies, NASAA's mission is to advance and promote a meaningful role for the arts in the lives of individuals, families and communities throughout the United States.*