FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Heart of Missouri United Way Expands Literacy Program Across Three Counties

Columbia, MO – November 4, 2026 – Heart of Missouri United Way is expanding its elementary literacy initiative beyond Columbia Public Schools, bringing free books to students in eight additional school districts across Boone, Cooper, and Howard counties. To reflect this regional growth, the organization is transitioning the program from **Read Across Columbia** to **Read Across Heart of Missouri**.

Since 2021, Read Across Columbia has helped remove barriers to early literacy by placing high-quality, inclusive books directly into the hands and homes of students. In partnership with Columbia Public Schools, the program currently serves approximately 650 first and second-grade students annually, providing four free books per child along with a book coupon donated by Daniel Boone Regional Library. Together, those efforts put more than 3,200 books and coupons into the community each year.

The newly expanded Read Across Heart of Missouri initiative builds on that success by extending the program into districts with some of the highest free and reduced-price lunch participation rates

across Heart of Missouri United Way's three-county service area. This year, second-grade students in the following districts will receive free books through the program:

Boone County

- Sturgeon R-V School District

Cooper County

- Boonville R-I School District
- Prairie Home R-V School District
- Otterville R-VI School District
- Blackwater R-II School District
- Cooper County R-IV School District

Howard County

- Fayette R-III School District
- Glasgow School District

Heart of Missouri United Way plans to continue expanding the initiative in future years to serve both first and second-grade students in participating districts.

Students participating in the program this year will receive age-appropriate books selected to encourage a lifelong love of reading, including:

- *Unsettling Salad!* by Aaron Reynolds
- *Earl & Worm: Bad Ideas and Other Stories* by Greg Pizzoli
- *Tater Tales: Greatest in the World* by Ben Clanton
- *Amber Brown Is Not a Crayon* by Paula Danziger

"What began as Read Across Columbia has grown into something that serves children across our entire region," said Talia Jackson, President & CEO of Heart of Missouri United Way. "Studies consistently show that children who have more books at home are more likely to become strong readers. By expanding Read Across Heart of Missouri, we're not only providing books to children today, we're helping create home environments that foster learning, encourage a lifelong love of reading, and support future success."

To celebrate the program's expansion, Heart of Missouri United Way will host a **Read Across Heart of Missouri Media Day** on Monday, November 9, 2026, at Hannah Cole Primary School in Boonville. The event will feature remarks from Heart of Missouri United Way and Boonville R-I School District representatives, followed by a reading of *Earl & Worm* with second-grade students.

Event Details

What: Read Across Heart of Missouri Media Day
Who: Heart of Missouri United Way and Boonville R-I School District
When: Monday, November 9, 2026, at 12:15 p.m.
Where: Hannah Cole Primary School, 1700 W. Ashley Road, Boonville, MO 65233
Why: To celebrate literacy and provide new books to elementary students

About Heart of Missouri United Way

Since 1946, Heart of Missouri United Way has brought people, resources, and partners together to create lasting, measurable change across Boone, Cooper, and Howard counties. Guided by its mission to positively impact lives by empowering people and organizations through strategic resource investments, the organization mobilizes community action to advance Community Resiliency, Healthy Community, Financial Security, and Youth Opportunity. Through strategic investments, community partnerships, volunteer engagement, and initiatives that connect people to critical resources, Heart of Missouri United Way helps build a stronger, more resilient Heart of Missouri. Learn more at uwheartmo.org.

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