

# Gulf Coast Community Foundation Supports Improving Children's Reading Skills

---

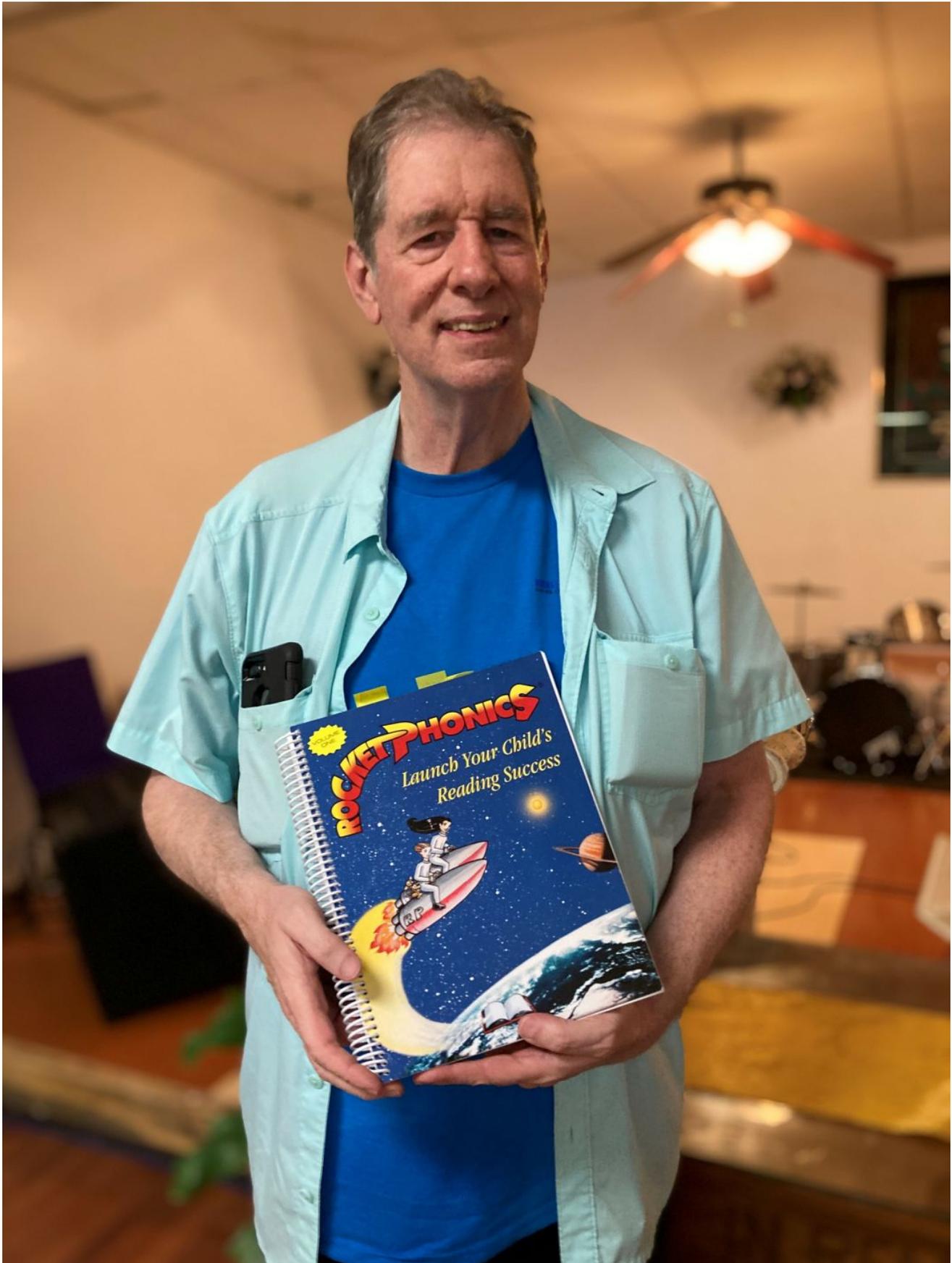
 [sarasotamagazine.com/sponsored/2023/02/gulf-coast-community-foundation-supports-improving-children-s-reading-skills](https://sarasotamagazine.com/sponsored/2023/02/gulf-coast-community-foundation-supports-improving-children-s-reading-skills)

1. Sponsored
2. Gulf Coast Community Foundation Supports Improving Children's Reading Skills

## Sponsored Content

Learn how a nonprofit is connecting with the community to teach students how to read in Sarasota County.

Presented by Gulf Coast Community Foundation What's This? February 22, 2023



Dr. Stephen Guffanti, founder and CEO of Rocket Phonics Foundation, holds the Rocket Phonics workbook.

Did you know that according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, there are 35 million children struggling to read in America? With the COVID-19 pandemic shutting down schools and transitioning students to virtual learning, children significantly fell behind in their reading. According to the CDC, elementary school children with weak literacy and numeracy skills often struggle academically through the middle and high school years.

In December, we at Gulf Coast Community Foundation awarded a \$5,000 Community Grant to Rocket Phonics Foundation through the Gould Family Trust Foundation at Gulf Coast. The grant is designated to be used for Newtown Reading Clinics. Dr. Stephen Guffanti is the creator of Rocket Phonics Foundation and is partnering with Newtown faith communities on the clinics. In other sites, to date, they have reached 524 kids (preschool and school-aged) in Sarasota and Manatee counties.

Rocket Phonics Foundation's mission is to save lives one reader at a time. The organization focuses on closing the persistent reading achievement gap through the use of the Rocket Phonics Reading program. The organization facilitates safe and fun learning experiences. Rocket Phonics is a series of reading games that can bring children to grade level in weeks instead of years. For many kids, reading was a nightmare they dreaded, but the game-based program and the rapid success turns reading into a joy.

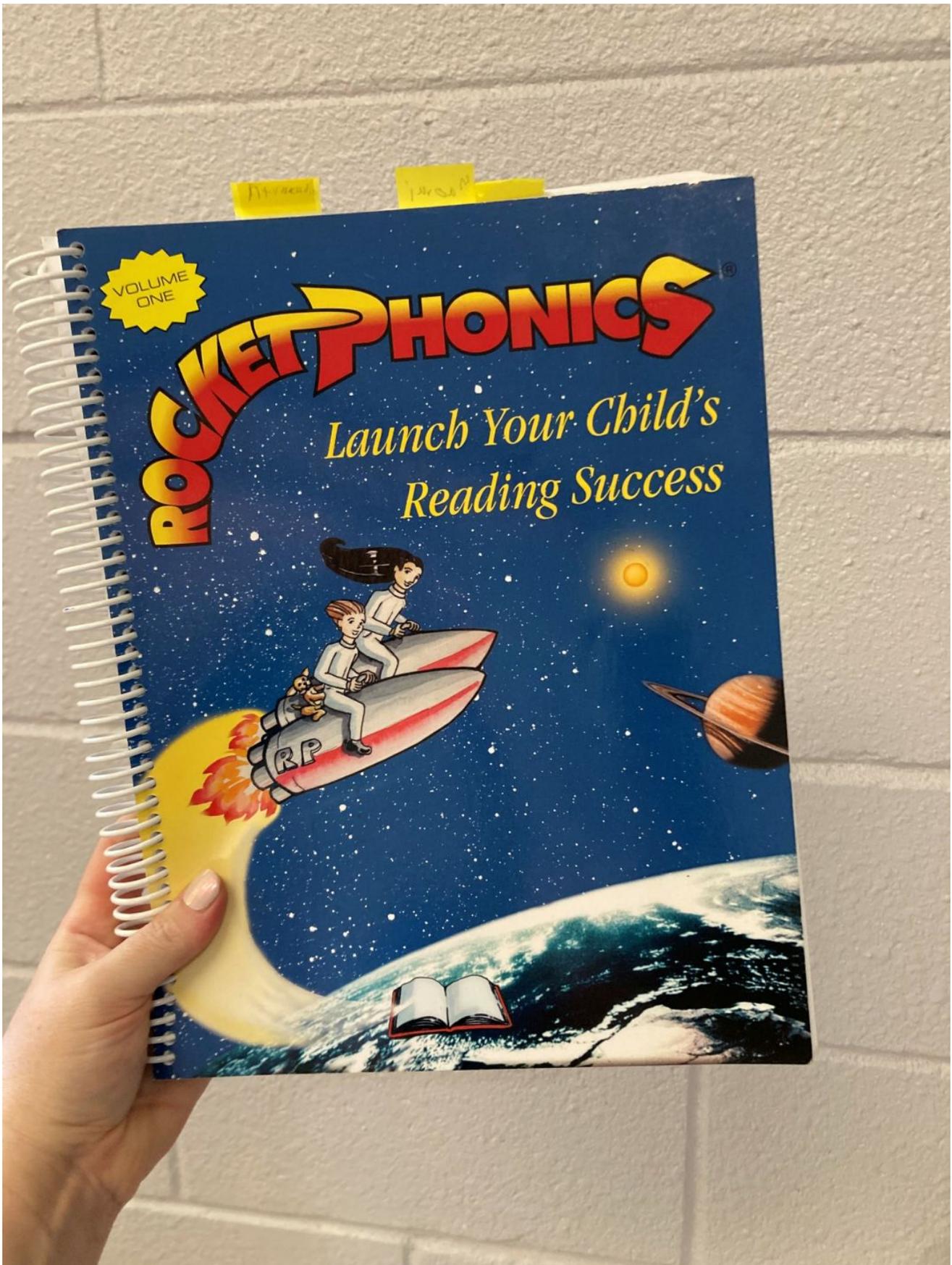
“Rocket Phonics looks like just a game but soon the children are reading, which is essential to their future success. Dr. Guffanti and the volunteers have committed to helping our youngest students to achieve beyond their wildest dreams. These clinics are a wonderful example of philanthropy - the love of humanity,” said Director of Community Leadership for Gulf Coast Community Foundation Jennifer Johnston.

## **Opportunities for All**

Dr. Guffanti started his medical career at the Los Angeles county jail as an emergency room physician. One day he came home and his young daughter said, “I’m not going to learn to read.” Dr. Guffanti responded very simply. He gathered all of her stuffed animals together and he and his wife taught their daughter to read as though the stuffed animals were teaching her. In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Dr. Guffanti learned from their daughter’s teacher that she was reading at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade level. His wife suggested he write a reading program.

Dr. Guffanti had a friend who was the dean of the graduate school of education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and he asked him to test his program. The average reading-level gain was a year in three months. Dr. Guffanti then decided to market the program to homeschool families who had remedial readers.

In 2014, Dr. Guffanti moved to Florida and in 2018 a friend asked him to go to the children in Newtown. So, Dr. Guffanti went to Newtown and used the reading program with the kids at a church-sponsored school. “I was stunned at how well it went. The program works just like UCLA said, very fast and very well,” said Dr. Guffanti. He saw the children come alive



The Rocket Phonics workbook that teaches children to read through games.

through learning how to read better. They received better grades in school, their teachers responded well to them, and they blossomed.

“I am very grateful for Gulf Coast Community Foundation and the Gould family’s graciousness. We were able to get the dollars matched for the Newtown Reading Clinic by the City of Sarasota’s Newtown Redevelopment Committee. You can see the impact of illiteracy - it’s painful and multigenerational. We just play games with the students and the games teach the foundations of reading,” shared Dr. Guffanti.



Children from the first Summer Reading Challenge wear colored bracelets that represent books they’ve read.

“If we don’t capture their heart, what will we do to capture their minds? The kids have failed to read from other methods and failing hurts. The reason we use games and let them win is that it builds their confidence, their willingness to try, and it serves the teachers extraordinarily well,” continued Dr. Guffanti. “Our volunteers are instrumental in helping the kids. There are 4,705 elementary students reading below grade level in Sarasota County. If we can go to them in an afterschool program like we’re doing in Newtown, then we’ve got

what is needed to close the gap,” said Dr. Guffanti. “I’m just the catalyst. The real workers are the organizations in Newtown who will bring the children and provide a place for us to operate. Those organizations include Newtown Community Ministries United, Brotherhood of Men, and the Sarasota Ministerial Association,” said Dr. Guffanti.

Bill Nease, board member of Rocket Phonics Foundation, shared that they are engaging with the school district and have a test site at Wilkinson Elementary School for Rocket Phonics. “One of our objectives has been to work with schools and churches, uniting those two elements, by developing groups of volunteers that work with afterschool programs in the schools. Ultimately we want to do more with other such sites. The churches are one of the main sources from where we can get our volunteers,” shared Nease.



Mount Calvary Baptist Church is the host site of the Newtown Reading Clinics.

The Newtown Reading Clinics run from 3:30 – 5:00 p.m. on Wednesdays and Thursdays at Mount Calvary Baptist Church. They started on February 1 and last until May. There are two goals of the clinics: to get kids to love reading and to get them to read above grade level and be the best readers in their class. Financial Secretary for Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Barbara Benson, shared, “You can have great adventures when you’re reading. You may be able to go places you never get to go to otherwise.”

**We sat down with founder and CEO Dr. Stephen Guffanti to learn more.**

**Q: How are children in Newtown feeling the impact of this reading program?**

Dr. Guffanti: We have 10 kids total thus far in the clinic. We would like to fill the clinic with 20 children total. They range from kindergarten to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The first thing we do is evaluate where they are in reading. We need five more volunteers to help us.

**Q: What's next for Newtown Reading Clinics?**

Dr. Guffanti: We will gather pre-test and post-test data, and if we are at 90% or thereabouts reading above grade level, then I will see if we can explore more clinics. We are using the Newtown Reading Clinics as a pilot study and model. I think it's time to end the achievement gap in Sarasota County.

What's next for Rocket Phonics Foundation? "I'd like to turn Sarasota County into the best school district in the state. We are not far off. I think our teachers deserve this recognition. Reading affects all the other subjects that children are taught. If we could just get the 25% of students farthest behind to get to grade level, then we're there," said Dr. Guffanti.

If you're interested in being a volunteer with Rocket Phonics Foundation, you can start the process by visiting <https://rocketphonics.org/volunteer/>.