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Grioli: Good morning. Thank you for that kind introduction, and for this opportunity to speak with you today.

Today, I stand here in front of you as one woman representing two timeless American institutions, Macy's and United Way. As a member of United Way Women's Leadership Councils I join 50,000 women across the country who are committed to advancing the common good, especially by increasing early grade reading scores.

With my Macy's hat on, I believe giving back is the right thing to do. It's our long-standing tradition and one of which we are very proud. We believe that actions speak louder than words when it comes to helping tackle some of the toughest problems facing

us today. Last year our Macy's Partners in Time volunteers rolled up their sleeves and spent more than 122,000 hours volunteering in communities.

The late Representative Shirley Chisholm offered one of the best rationales for getting involved in your community that I've ever heard. She was an extraordinary woman — the first black woman elected to Congress, and the first black candidate from a major party to run for president. She said, quote, Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.

At Macy's we believe this to our core. We know to be most impactful in our corporate social investments, we must focus on addressing the needs of our communities. For us, education always rises to the top. As a corporation, we recognize that investing in human capital leads to improved performance – for the employees we manage, the customers we serve and the country in which we live. Businesses like ours are more likely to thrive when today's public leaders make wise investments in programs that lay the foundation for success in college, career and life.

That is why our Partners in Time volunteers are out participating in mentoring and tutoring programs, supporting early childhood education programs, summer reading programs, and adopt-a-school programs. This is also why we are partners with United Way.

As Chair of the United Way National Women's Leadership Council Taskforce on Early Grade Reading, I can share the magnitude of the problem with one statistic — one out of every three 4th graders in the U.S. scores below basic in reading proficiency. That's one third of 4th graders! Just to be clear, because, as I got involved, I needed to understand what "below basic" meant – "below basic means these kids can barely read a simple story." And the numbers are even worse for low-income and minority students. Eighty-three percent of 4th graders from low-income families cannot read at a proficient level.

We know this challenge starts early. In America, by age four, children of affluent families have heard 45 million words. Children of working class families have

heard 26 million words. Children born of poverty have heard just 14 million words. That's a 32 million-word gap between rich and poor kindergarten students — a gap that puts so many students at risk.

Reading proficiency is a key factor in a child's educational development. Students with smaller vocabularies have poorer comprehension skills, which make them less able to understand both their teachers and their lessons.

An inability to read well has a snowball effect. It makes a child far more likely to slip behind in her or his schoolwork, and as the years go on, greatly increases the likelihood that that child will drop out of school — A child that is not reading proficiently by the 4th grade is four times more likely to drop out of high school! This, naturally, has a negative effect on the ability, growing into adulthood, to find a good job — earn a decent wage — support a family — and become a productive member of society.

The child suffers.

The children suffer.

Families suffer.

Communities suffer.

We all suffer.

But we have the ability to make a difference. And that's why we've declared open season on poor early grade reading skills.

Our education experts tell us there are a few key strategies on which we must focus. First, parents want to help their kids learn to read, yet they often do not have the resources to do so. Second, schools must have the text books, techniques and curricula that are grounded in best practice and we must help teachers teach in ways that engage children. Finally and simply, kids who need extra help must get it. Connecting struggling students with a caring adult is a strategy that we know works.

That is why, earlier this year, United Way Worldwide launched a nationwide campaign to recruit one million volunteer readers, tutors and mentors and the Women's Leadership Councils committed to help. This is a challenge we all have the power to influence by getting involved. You can by committing to reading, to tutoring or to mentoring a young person.

We have been involved in this work at Macy's for years. This year we started something that was new for us. Thanks to a partnership with United Way and ePals, we adopted a classroom and have begun e-tutoring relationships. Our employees are guided by the teacher, read the same books the students are reading, and have a chance to share their love of books and build reading skills with the students. It's a great win for all of us.

We all know that improving the schools is a giant task. But if we take it child by child; make the right investments; involve the schools, the parents and the

communities - and we are the community by the way, every one of us! – we can create the change our kids deserve. Here's how a former superintendent of public schools in Chicago and Oakland put it. Her name is Doctor Ruth Love — don't you love that name? Doctor Love said, quote, If we parents read to our pre-school children for fifteen minutes a day, we could revolutionize the schools.

Instilling a love of reading in a child is one of the most important, and satisfying things, any parent or adult can do. When we read aloud to children, we fire their imaginations and encourage creative thinking. That's exactly what our million volunteer readers, tutors and mentors challenge is all about.

We're helping deliver one of the most crucial ingredients to the healthy development of young children. We're cultivating a joy of learning and a desire for education. We're encouraging children to choose reading as a free-time activity that opens up

new worlds and the promise of a better life ahead. We're helping parents and teachers instill the language and vocabulary skills that children need to achieve their dreams. Please join us, pledge to be a volunteer reader, tutor or mentor at liveunited.org/wlcvolunteer and get your friends to do the same.

But it's not just a personal issue — it's a lot bigger than that. One school administrator who has spoken on about how our educational system has lost its competitive spirit, has put it this way:

She said, quote: In America we see education as a social issue, not an economic one. And what happens to social issues in times of economic hardship? They get swept under the rug. We need to change our national conversation on education and our national culture on how we encourage kids. If we don't start to shift our perspective, we'll never regain our position in the global marketplace.

Indeed – we do have a national crisis on our hands. In America, right now – a kid drops out of high school every 26 seconds – that is 1.2 million a year. High school dropouts are 8 times more likely to go to prison, and won't be eligible for 90% of new jobs. We are losing our competitive edge, Out of 28 reporting developed countries, United States ranked 20th in high school graduation rates.

And, as we all know too well, those times of economic hardship are here. And education is taking it on the chin. Everywhere you look, school budgets are under ferocious attack. Funds for salaries, for books, for facilities are being frozen or slashed.

Government is a part of the solution and must prioritize our nation's educational attainment in its policies and funding allocations. .As Congress makes appropriations decisions, it is critical that we make a strong federal investment in high quality literacy

instruction that helps our young people receive the supports they need to achieve academic success.

We recognize the difficult decisions you are faced with. However, literacy programs, especially those focused on the early years, offer substantial benefits to children and prepare them for success in school, the workforce and their lives in general. And while United Way and Macy's have put a stake in the ground around early grade reading, there is simply not enough private foundation or corporate resources to meet the need for quality literacy programs.

But government can't do it alone. The community, parents, teachers and others must also do their part.

It's about people.

People of all ages.

Of all colors.

Of all economic backgrounds.

People who believe that we need to narrow the achievement gap — that we need to maximize, not

undercut, opportunities for our children to become the absolute best they can be.

Today our children need us more than ever. I am outraged, as I hope you will be too, by the unacceptably low level of early childhood reading. The stakes are high. The time to act is now.

Together, we can narrow the achievement gap. We can help open the doors to our children's dreams. Propel them to new heights. Put fresh opportunities within reach.

First children learn to read, then they read to learn. I believe with all my heart that helping children learn to read better is, quite simply, our moral and economic imperative.

At United Way we often talk about the common good. But it's not just a slogan. If there's one thing that my years with the United Way have taught me, it's that

the power of people united is a mighty force to behold. We're all in this together. It's in our makeup.

It's who we are.

It's what we do.

It's where we live.

And it's why we're making a difference.

Our journey begins now.

By they way, I have referenced hats, sleeve and makeup here today – all are available at your local Macy's department store.