

## Closing the Opportunity Gap for Early Readers

### *A Field Scan of Programs, Partnerships and Key Challenges for Public Libraries to Reach and Serve Low-Income K-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Students to Improve Their Reading Achievement*

#### Overview

With funding support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) initiated a partnership with the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) to explore a critical education issue: how to ensure that low-income, struggling readers in K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade have access to reading support services available at the public library. Library reading and tutoring programs can supplement students' school work and help them make significant progress towards reading at grade level. The initiative, called the *National Forum on Closing the Opportunity Gap for Early Readers*, is informed by the expertise and experience of a select group of leaders from public school systems, public library systems, and other national organizations who will come together in a two-day convening to discuss issues and challenges, share best practices, and develop recommendations.

To provide background for the discussions and inform the initiative, a field scan was conducted to identify promising programs, effective library-school partnerships, and challenges libraries face in reaching and engaging low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to improve their reading proficiency. The field scan included a focus group of school district leaders from Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, Milwaukee Public Schools, Providence Public School District, and San Diego Unified School District and a survey completed by 92 ULC member libraries. (See appendix A.)

Based on information gathered from the field scan, four overall themes emerged:

1. Libraries are already working to close the opportunity gap by providing a range of literacy programs for low-income early readers who need extra support.
2. Alphabetic principles, phonics/phonemic awareness, fluency, letter and word recognition, and sound association – skills that are best developed through one-on-one or group reading aloud sessions and reciprocal reading – are critical building blocks for struggling K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade readers.
3. Collaboration between libraries and schools is an effective course of action to identify and engage young readers who need assistance, design programs to meet their needs, and assess improvement.
4. Connecting with low-income readers who need reading support and sustaining their involvement in supplemental literacy programs is an on-going challenge for both schools and libraries.

These four themes are explored more fully in the report that follows. The field scan and discussions from the Forum convening will shape a national call-to-action report to advance this work.

## Public Library Reading Programs

Libraries are currently providing a range of programs aimed at improving reading proficiency of school children. More than 82 percent of libraries that responded to the ULC survey reported that they offer programs designed to improve the reading proficiency of struggling low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade children. Library programs that serve this audience include summer learning, afterschool one-on-one tutoring by trained literacy aides, library card outreach programs to connect young readers with library resources as a starting point for improving reading skills, and bringing library literacy services to community programs that serve low-income children such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and United Way.

Summer learning (also called summer reading) is one of the major ways libraries engage struggling readers. While most summer learning programs are not tailored exclusively for low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, research and experience have shown that low-income students are most at-risk of falling behind on reading proficiency during the summer months and, therefore, are a primary target audience for library summer learning.

Many libraries offer both summer and year-round literacy programs that are specifically tailored for low-income readers, sometimes based on the location where the program is delivered or the partners that support the work. For example:

- **Santa Clara County Library District's *Power School*** is a six-week summer learning program offered at one library branch in partnership with the Gilroy Public School District and other community agencies that provides low-income students with STEM-based learning and literacy activities.
- **Richmond Public Library's *Catch the Reading Wave: Summer Reading Intervention*** is offered in child-care sites that serve low-income children. Pre- and post- assessments are used to measure participant progress.
- **Richland Library's *Project Summer Slide*** is a four-week, four days a week summer camp for rising 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students held at a local elementary school which is also a summer food service program site. Teachers lead literacy activities three days each week and the library coordinates one-on-one tutoring and literacy enrichment on the fourth day each week.
- **Virginia Beach Public Library's *Summer Slide Partnership Program*** focuses on bringing library events and STEM and literacy programming into Title I schools of the Virginia Beach City Public Schools district, serving high percentages of children from low-income families.
- **Cuyahoga County Public Library's *1-2-3 Read*** program provides after-school one-on-one and small group literacy development for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students who are identified by the school district as at risk of not meeting the Ohio Third-Grade Reading Guarantee.
- **New York Public Library's *Literacy Leaders*** program trains high-school students to be reading tutors through a credit-earning course and then hires them to work with struggling 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade readers during a seven-week summer session.

- **Scottsdale Public Library's *ReadUp Scottsdale*** is an 8-10 week tutoring program for at-risk 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade children. Trained volunteer tutors work with groups of four to five children who are at the same reading level twice a week for 60 minutes.

Three characteristics of library programs for low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade readers emerged from the ULC survey:

1. **A majority of the programs require enrollment.** Targeted programs for struggling readers, particularly small group sessions or individual tutoring, more often use enrollment to increase the likelihood of sustained participation. However, libraries have long recognized that high-quality drop-in programs provide opportunities for children and families who may not be able to commit to a structured multi-week program. In some cases, the flexibility of dropping in when time and circumstances permit is the only way to get struggling low-income readers to participate in support programs and may lead to more sustained commitment if the drop-in experience is positive.
2. **Libraries use a variety of literacy activities to meet the needs of struggling young readers with story time/large group read-aloud sessions as the most popular approach.** Other frequently used literacy activities include one-on-one reading with adult or teen partners, teaching new words, word recognition, and reading comprehension.
3. **Most library literacy programs are connected to state education standards, grade-level school curriculum, and/or community-wide education programs.** Nearly 80 percent of libraries that responded to the ULC survey said their programs are aligned with national, state, and/or community goals. Examples of program connections include the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, Ohio's Third-Grade Reading Guarantee, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards, Common Core State Standards, the New York Early Learning Guidelines, and general school-readiness goals.

### School-Based Approaches to Literacy Development

Ensuring that all children can read at grade level is a top priority for schools beginning with basic literacy skills. From diagnosing literacy needs and measuring progress to connecting students with literacy support services outside the classroom, schools are deeply invested in improving reading proficiency for all students.

Key observations from the CGCS focus group that inform how libraries can best serve low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> graders to improve their reading achievement include:

- **Reading is complicated and literacy deficits can be difficult to diagnose.** Just because a child is having difficulty reading doesn't mean that he or she doesn't have the intellectual capacity to learn to read with the right support to overcome deficits. Schools use diagnostic assessment tools such as the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and Fountas and Pinnell Literacy Resources as well as observation and interaction with students to determine their independent reading level including both the instructional level and the frustration level.

Libraries may be well positioned to help children deal with the frustration of not being able to keep up with reading expectations which can cause young readers to "check out" as learners.

- **Phonics/phonemic awareness, word recognition, fluency, and vocabulary development are essential building blocks for struggling K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade readers.** Reading aloud either in a group or by students and tutors in one-on-one coaching sessions builds and reinforces word recognition through sound association, which leads to improved reading comprehension. Focusing on phonics, word recognition, and vocabulary development is particularly important for children from immigrant families whose English language skills are sometimes limited or whose parents may have limited reading skills. Without support services that focus on phonics, word recognition, fluency, and vocabulary development, many of these children will fall further and further behind.

Results from the ULC survey indicated that library literacy programs for struggling young readers focus on basic word recognition/phonics which school leaders say are vital to reading success, with particular emphasis on read-aloud sessions, including librarians reading to students and students reading to library tutors.

- **Partnerships and specialized support services are important components of school literacy programming.** Schools work with libraries, universities, and community-based organizations to expand services for struggling readers beyond the classroom. For example, in addition to its long-standing partnership with the Nashville Public Library, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools works with Vanderbilt University to provide tutors for struggling readers. Many school districts also have math and reading coaches in every school to support struggling readers and connect to individual student needs in more focused ways.

Libraries are particularly adept at building partnerships to support education goals. In addition to schools, libraries regularly work with a range of organizations and groups such as community colleges, high-tech companies, public housing authorities, civic organizations, and nonprofits to broaden the impact of their programs.

- **Many school systems have family engagement departments and parent liaison positions to support active and engaged parents.** Education research has consistently shown that parent engagement and support at home are critical to a student’s academic success. Family engagement departments and parent liaisons in schools connect families to community support services and help schools/teachers connect directly with parents. In some cases, the liaisons are parents of children in the schools. Other school systems have full-time departments with paid staff that offer a range of programs and services to parents – all with the same goal of improving student success. Engagement departments and liaisons often help parents deal with day-to-day needs that sometimes interfere with addressing their children’s literacy development.

Libraries have emerged as powerful resources for two-generation learning that fosters stronger family bonds and helps parents become their children's first and best teachers. As the only education institution that connects with individual learning needs from birth through senior years, libraries can be particularly valuable resources to support schools' family engagement goals.

### Public Library-Public School Partnerships

The information gathered from the ULC survey and the CGCS focus group indicates that partnerships between library systems and school districts are an effective course of action to reaching and engaging

low-income struggling readers. Each system has expertise and experience that, when brought together, multiplies the impact made on reading achievement of students in their shared jurisdictions.

Libraries look to schools to:

- Refer struggling readers who need extra support that the library can provide.
- Help design programs to improve reading proficiency among K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade low-income students.
- Share information to measure progress.

Schools look to libraries to:

- Instill a love of reading in young children and build a culture of reading that carries beyond specific activities and classes.
- Use their expertise in children’s literature to connect children with interesting books that they will want to read, including providing free books to children who do not have books at home.
- Provide incentives that motivate kids to read – games, competitions, and rewards that make reading enjoyable and exciting rather than frustrating and frightening.
- Supplement school literacy programs after school and during the summer.
- Provide social supports – e.g., free meals, child care, translation services for parents, and job support – that make it possible for low-income families to focus on their children’s reading needs.

Public libraries have deep community connections which are valuable in helping families overcome day-to-day obstacles that may interfere with their ability to focus on improving their children’s reading proficiency. At the library, parents can take advantage of a clearinghouse of resources to support their family well-being while children are engaged in tutoring and reading activities. Building a strong public school-public library social safety net that is directly connected to overcoming family obstacles may increase participation in available literacy support services and improve the reading achievement of low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students.

The importance and value of school-library partnerships came through strongly in data from the ULC member survey:

- More than 86 percent of responding libraries coordinate with school districts to identify struggling low-income readers.
- Nearly 65 percent work with individual schools and 58 percent work directly with teachers for both outreach and program design.
- Among libraries reporting that they don’t currently have specific programs for struggling low-income readers, a majority (58 percent) say collaboration with school districts would help the library better reach and engage K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to improve their reading proficiency.

*“The school/library partnership is so important to make the [program] logistics work, as well as reach the families effectively. The schools want to help students succeed and value the way the library can work with them to offer exciting programs plus the chance for children and their parents to see what free resources for lifelong learning are always available at the library.”* Santa Clara County Library District

Although some libraries reported that they do not currently offer reading programs specifically for low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade readers or work directly with schools on reading initiatives, they *do* participate in multiple community learning and education networks to fill gaps. Networks mentioned in the ULC

member survey include collective impact networks led by the United Way, city/county committees on youth and families that are designed to serve low-income students, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, and Community Schools. Participation in community education networks ensures that libraries are “at the table” when community education priorities are discussed, programs designed, and decisions made.

## Key Challenges

The field scan identified school-based approaches to improving literacy and library programs that are helping improve reading proficiency among low-income young readers. Information collected also revealed three continuing challenges that libraries and schools face in meeting the needs of this audience.

### 1. **Connecting low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade children and their families with literacy support services.**

Schools and libraries both recognize how vital literacy support services are for the low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade audience. Without extra outreach – more than flyers and presentations – these students may not be aware of free programming available to them and may slip through the cracks and fall further behind in reading proficiency. Even when children and families do know about the opportunities for reading support, they sometimes don’t participate because of day-to-day obstacles, particularly lack of transportation. In fact, 82 percent of the libraries indicating that they do not have a specific program designed for low-income, struggling K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade readers named lack of transportation to the library as a major barrier to reaching this population. Many libraries overcome this obstacle by delivering programs to children where they are – in day-care and community centers, branches closest to where the children live or attend school, their schools, and community rooms in public housing developments.

### 2. **Lack of literacy expertise to diagnose reading challenges and deliver programs that are tailored to meet identified needs.**

Recognizing that all elementary school teachers may not be literacy experts and most libraries do not have literacy expertise on staff, school leaders say that diagnosing reading challenges of struggling students is complex. Additionally, many of the available assessment tools are expensive.

Over 40 percent of libraries surveyed said they do not offer literacy programming specifically for struggling low-income readers because they are not confident they have the programming or staff expertise to meet the needs of this group. Resources that libraries say would help them better serve low-income K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students improve their reading proficiency include:

- Research on literacy development and staff training/professional development to develop and deliver effective programs to respond to identified literacy needs.
- Better understanding of expectations for grade-level reading proficiency.
- Increased capacity, resources, and general technical support to better serve struggling readers.

### 3. **Assessing the effectiveness of library literacy programs in achieving gains for struggling low-income readers.**

Many libraries use parent surveys and exit interviews/surveys of student participants as the primary tools for assessing the impact of their literacy programs. Nearly 30 percent of the libraries that responded to the ULC survey said the library and the school district share data to correlate whether

library program participants make gains on standardized tests. Other respondents said they were working on data-sharing agreements with school districts to be able to correlate library program participation with test results. Parent surveys and observation of/ engagement with young readers provide anecdotal evidence that library programs build reading confidence, increase enjoyment of reading, and foster positive attitudes toward reading and the library – all critical steps toward improving reading proficiency.

Because schools have more expertise in measuring student performance and regularly review and assess reading proficiency, data-sharing agreements between schools and libraries offer opportunities to produce concrete and measureable results.

#### **4. On-going challenges to building and sustaining strong library-school partnerships.**

The field scan indicated that libraries and schools recognize the importance of strong library-school partnerships to meet the needs of struggling K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade readers and begin to close the opportunity gap. But schools and libraries encounter challenges in building strong partnerships including:

- Regular, timely, consistent communication among the right people to get the work done, including both top level and front-line staff.
- Negotiating partnership and/or data sharing agreements to facilitate regular collaboration.
- Inability to share achievement data due to student privacy requirements.
- Lack of understanding about the role and capacity of libraries as education institutions and the impact libraries can have on student success.
- Personnel changes at all levels in both schools and libraries that interfere with sustained collaboration and lead to starting over each time new staff members join the team.
- Lack of a system-wide approach to collaboration – school district to library system vs. school to branch library or project to project.
- Recognizing the value of, supporting, and promoting out-of-school activities to supplement school-day work.

### **Questions for Additional Research and Discussion**

Several questions emerged from the analysis of the field scan data and will be explored during the Forum convening and in the call-to-action publication for the *National Forum on Closing the Opportunity Gap for Early Readers* initiative:

1. Can the needs of low-income struggling young readers be met by general library reading programs rather than tailored services? How?
2. Do enrollment-based programs lead to better outcomes for struggling early readers than drop-in programs? How can library enrollment programs be designed to attract/engage readers who need sustained attention?
3. What additional resources do schools and libraries need to better assess reading needs and tailor programs to meet those needs?
4. How can libraries and schools work together more effectively to measure shared outcomes from literacy programs?

## Appendix A

### 92 Public Libraries that completed the ULC survey:

Anchorage Public Library	Jefferson County Public Library	Russell Library
Arlington Heights Memorial Library	Johnson County Library	Saint Paul Public Library
Baltimore County Public Library	Kalamazoo Public Library	Salt Lake County Library Services
Brooklyn Public Library	Kansas City Public Library	San Antonio Public Library
Broward County Library	King County Library System	San Diego County Library
Calgary Public Library	Las Vegas-Clark County Library District	San Diego Public Library
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh	Lexington Public Library	San Francisco Public Library
Cedar Rapids Public Library	Los Angeles Public Library	San Jose Public Library
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library	Loudoun County Public Library	San Mateo County Libraries
Chattanooga Public Library	Madison Public Library	Santa Clara County Library District
Chicago Public Library	Marin County Free Library	Scottsdale Public Library
Cleveland Public Library	Memphis Public Library and Information Center	Skokie Public Library
Columbus Metropolitan Library	Miami-Dade Public Library System	Sno-Isle Libraries
Contra Costa County Library	Mid-Continent Public Library	Springfield City Library
County of Los Angeles Public Library	Milwaukee Public Library	St. Louis County Library
Cuyahoga County Public Library	Montgomery County Public Libraries	St. Louis Public Library
Dallas Public Library	Multnomah County Library	Stark County District Library
Dayton Metro Library	Nashville Public Library	Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library
DC Public Library	New Haven Free Public Library	The Public Library of Albuquerque-Bernalillo County
DeKalb County Public Library	New Orleans Public Library	Toledo Lucas County Public Library
Denver Public Library	New York Public Library	Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library
Do Space (Omaha, NE)	Oakland Public Library	Toronto Public Library
Durham County Library	Palo Alto City Library	Virginia Beach Public Library
Edmonton Public Library	PCCLD	Wichita Public Library
Enoch Pratt Free Library	Pima County Public Library	
Fort Worth Library	Pioneer Library System	
Free Library of Philadelphia	Portland Public Library	
Fresno County Public Library	Prince George's County Memorial Library System	
Gwinnett County Public Library	Providence Public Library	
Hartford Public Library	Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County	
Hennepin County Library	Regina Public Library	
Houston Public Library	Richland Library	
Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library	Richmond Public Library	
Jacksonville Public Library	Rochester Public Library	