



URBAN  
LIBRARIES  
COUNCIL



STRATEGIC GUIDE

# The Leaders Library Card Challenge

Creating High-Level Partnerships to  
Improve Education Outcomes



# Dear Leader:

We know a good education increases the likelihood that every child, regardless of socioeconomic status, has a chance for a bright future. That's why it is essential that community education leaders like you – particularly the chief elected or appointed official, school superintendent and library director – work together to improve education outcomes for all children.

Over the past three years, leaders in more than 100 communities have worked together as part of the Leaders Library Card Challenge to ensure that all K-12 students have access to and know how to use the valuable learning resources in their public libraries. These powerful partnerships formed between elected, school and library leaders have improved education outcomes for all children and 3 million kids now have their first library card. This *Strategic Guide* provides a roadmap for successful collaboration, drawing on the experiences of participants in the Leaders Library Card Challenge. It recognizes that one size doesn't fit all communities, instead offering options for moving forward – with a constant eye on fighting the good fight for our children.

We are deeply grateful to participants in the Leaders Library Card Challenge for their commitment, creativity, persistence and willingness to share their successes and failures along the way. Their stories helped create this guide which we hope will expand this important work to many more communities.

The Leaders Library Card Challenge is an award-winning program, recognized by the American Society of Association Executives as a 2018 Power of A Gold Award winner for its broad impact.

Together, we can make a difference for all children.



Susan Benton  
President and CEO  
Urban Libraries Council

# Introduction

Expanding on the work of the Leaders Library Card Challenge, this *Strategic Guide* provides 10 steps library leaders can follow to launch and sustain a partnership between local government, school and library leaders to connect K-12 students to their public libraries as a path to improved education outcomes.

## About the Leaders Library Card Challenge

Launched in 2015 as part of President Obama's ConnectED Initiative, the Leaders Library Card Challenge grew out of the belief that more intentional collaboration among mayors/county executives, school superintendents and library directors could improve education outcomes for all students, begin to close achievement gaps and establish a foundation for an integrated approach to education.

More than 100 library systems in North America have participated in the Challenge, issuing new library cards to 3 million children. However, these collaborative efforts are about much more than library cards. Participating library systems report achieving these outcomes:

- 90% built strong relationships with school leaders
- 66% saw an increase in student use of library learning resources
- 63% entered into a formal agreement or MOU with one or more school districts in their service area to ensure continued collaboration
- 71% launched new or expanded work with schools beyond library cards
- 40% built new relationships with elected and/or top appointed officials

## Why This Work Matters

Education success is the key to life success. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of quality education, too many of our children — particularly those from low-income families — continue to fall behind from an early age.

- 63% of all fourth graders are not reading at grade level, and 60% are not proficient in math.<sup>1</sup>
- Children who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school or not graduate on time.<sup>2</sup>
- 90% of students who drop out of school are not qualified for 90% of new jobs and earn 50% less than college graduates.<sup>3</sup>
- More than three out of five first graders (62.2%) living below the poverty level did not have library cards, and only 36% of children with the lowest socioeconomic status visited their library in their kindergarten years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2017 NAEP Report Card

<sup>2</sup> Donald Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation Rates* (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> *Afterschool and Summer Learning: A City Strategy to Support College and Career Readiness* (Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities, 2018), page 3

<sup>4</sup> *First Grade Student Library Card Ownership Linked to Library Visitation*, IMLS, Research Brief No. 6, (Washington, DC, Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2015)

## Collaborating to Create Sustained Change

The Leaders Library Card Challenge confirmed that partnerships among local elected leaders, school superintendents and library executives offer great promise for ensuring that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, can succeed in school, careers and life.

- **Top elected officials** set the tone for a collaborative approach to education, serve as catalysts for innovative action and have authority, voice and community connections. Regardless of government structure and formal reporting relationships, the chief elected official brings significant assets, resources and visibility to support sustained progress.
- **School superintendents** are at the center of the daily education lives of children, youth and teens and have their heads and hearts invested in kids' education. However, children only spend about 900 hours in school each year compared to 7,800 hours outside the classroom when they could be learning more.
- **Library executives** provide access to a range of education resources and approaches that supplement the classroom experience and offer valuable opportunities for seamless year-round learning. Even more important, libraries are trusted community anchors able to reach children and families where they are.

“The discussion around our future, and renewing San José’s promise of opportunity, must begin with our children. We can give every child the chance they deserve by leveraging our libraries, leadership, linkages and learning – and that means our city, our schools and our library working together.”

**SAM LICCARDO**  
**MAYOR**  
**CITY OF SAN JOSÉ**

## What We Learned

- When top elected officials, school superintendents and library directors work together on shared education goals, children and their families benefit.
- Patience and perseverance are essential when building new partnerships.
- Teachers can make a big difference in ensuring that students know how to use library resources to support classroom learning.
- Regular leader-to-leader and staff-to-staff communication are essential to sustain progress, address obstacles, respond to emerging challenges and monitor progress.
- The library director is the glue that sustains successful partnerships, particularly if leaders change and momentum falters.
- Sharing basic student information between school and library systems is an important component of a partnership that works.
- Despite the obstacles and challenges, investing in building high-level education partnerships is an essential investment in the future of our children.

## Action Steps

These 10 steps offer a framework for library leaders to launch and sustain partnerships around shared education goals:

1. Establish a baseline for action
2. Develop a preliminary plan for launching the partnership
3. Meet with top local government and school leaders
4. Create an infrastructure for collaboration
5. Announce the partnership and the shared goals
6. Commit to making policy changes to eliminate obstacles to library use
7. Develop a data-sharing strategy and agreement
8. Involve teachers
9. Be patient, persistent and flexible
10. Plan for longer-term impact



# 1. Establish a Baseline for Action

Long-term success starts with knowledge about current priorities, relationships, processes and challenges related to education and ensuring library access for all students.

## Examples of Baseline Information

- Existing processes for distributing library cards to students and the overall effectiveness of those processes.
- Obstacles to student library use based on experience, surveys and anecdotes.
- Data about the school system or systems such as total number of students, the number who already have library cards and frequency of use of those cards
- Existing relationships with school leaders in the library service area and the effectiveness and value of those relationships including information about any successes that might provide insight into how to launch this work.
- Existing relationships with chief elected and top appointed leaders in the library service area particularly in communities where the library is not part of the local government.
- How connecting children to the public library supports leadership and community priorities around education.

## Importance of the Baseline Assessment

The baseline assessment will provide a foundation for a conversation with local government and school leaders about the value of working together to improve education outcomes. Baseline information will also support measuring progress on achieving agreed-upon outcomes.

“Schools alone cannot prepare the children of Cleveland for the complex challenges of the 21st century global economy. Delivering a quality education in today's rapidly changing world requires the contribution, commitment and support of the entire community. The leadership of our Mayor and the work of the Cleveland Public Library are essential to our long-term success.”

**ERIC S. GORDON**  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**  
**CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOL**  
**DISTRICT**

## 2. Develop a Preliminary Plan for Launching the Partnership

Investing time on the front end to develop a preliminary plan will pay dividends when the library reaches out to local government and school leaders to explore working together. A preliminary plan provides a framework for collaboration – “let’s work together to achieve these outcomes” rather than simply “let’s work together.”

### Key Questions to Ask to Develop a Preliminary Plan of Action

1. What messages about education will resonate with the chief elected official?
2. What data from the baseline assessment will be most valuable in describing the opportunities for collaboration?
3. If the library system has more than one school district in its service area, which superintendent is likely to be most receptive to working together?
4. What commitments, resources and capacity will the library bring to the partnership and to student learning?
5. How will ensuring library access for all students support leader education goals?

### Plan for Library Data and Staff Needs

The library has the most reliable data about library cards and library use among students, and that information should be in hand when leadership conversations begin. From the start of those conversations, also be sure to identify key library staff who will lead and support the library card work since staff-to-staff relationships are essential to sustained success.

### 3. Meet with Top Local Government and School Leaders

The sequence for leadership meetings will vary widely depending on government structure, existing relationships, number of school districts in the library service area and highest-leverage opportunities.

#### **Suggested Steps for Creating Connections**    **Arranging Meetings Can Take Time**

- When the library system is part of the local government, meeting with chief elected official and/or top appointed official is the most appropriate starting point. The mayor/chief elected official may need to facilitate connections with the school district to establish the partnership.
- When there are multiple school districts within the library service area, consider beginning with the district with the highest potential for success because of existing relationships, a general willingness to collaborate or a history of successful smaller-scale collaborations.
- Explore potential benefits of convening all school superintendents and/or senior school leaders in the library service area to describe the planned effort and seek out interested school districts.
- Leverage successful relationships with local government and school district staff to facilitate high-level connections. Staff-to-staff relationships can open doors for higher-level collaboration.
- Provide a one-page summary of the planned effort including baseline data highlights, suggested outcomes and how the effort supports leadership education priorities as a leave-behind resource that the leader can share with key staff and interested parties.

Be persistent and patient in reaching out to and engaging top leaders. Failure to respond immediately is more likely due to pressures of the job rather than lack of interest.

## 4. Create an Infrastructure for Collaboration

While a verbal commitment to work together is a good start, education partnerships thrive when roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.

### Elements of a Successful Collaboration

- A signed document that establishes the partnership's importance and the commitment of the elected leader, school superintendent and library executive to work together around agreed-upon goals
- Identified staff from the library and school system to lead the day-to-day efforts
- A process for communicating regularly and monitoring progress
- A schedule of opportunities for high-level check ins to review progress and ensure sustained attention to the effort
- Understanding of how each system works — how they are different, how they can complement each other and the unique challenges each faces
- Flexibility to adapt to changing needs, expectations, external pressures and new challenges
- Clear definition of roles and expectations in an agreement or memorandum of understanding to ensure that the commitment to work together continues even if personnel changes
- Mutual respect and trust among all players
- An open mind and get-it-done attitude

### Start with a Commitment Letter

A simple commitment letter may be the best starting point to launch the partnership with a formal signed agreement coming later as the partnership gains traction. Participation in the Leaders Library Card Challenge began with a community's chief elected official, school superintendent and library executive signing the following letter:

*We are committed to working together as part of The Leaders Library Card Challenge to ensure that every K-12 student in our community has a library card and knows how to use it to access the learning resources available at their public libraries.*

*We look forward to strengthening our partnership to widen access to essential learning resources, begin to close achievement gaps, and build a foundation for sustained collaboration to improve education outcomes for all students in our community.*

Many participants combined signing the letter with a press release and/or media event to affirm their commitment publicly.



## 5. Announce the Partnership and Its Goals

Parents, educators and other players in the local education ecosystem will be interested in this high-level commitment to put kids first and the work that follows.

### **Ensure Parents in the Community Are Aware of the Partnership**

The mayor/chief elected official should take the lead in announcing the commitment with support from the library on details. It is especially important for parents to know about the collaboration so that they embrace and support the role of the library in their children's education. When parents know that their children are getting free library cards with no financial risks, they will be less likely to opt out of automatic distribution or more willing to opt in if the choice is offered.

### **How Libraries Can Lead in Raising Awareness of the Partnership**

Once the partnership is underway, showcasing the value of the collaboration using local media outlets, leadership convenings, planned celebrations and special events will contribute to sustained success. The library can take the lead in telling the story by providing great examples, documenting results and scheduling and coordinating events in schools, community centers and neighborhood libraries – always emphasizing the power of the collaboration and great work of local government and school partners.

## 6. Commit to Making Policy Changes to Eliminate Obstacles to Library Use

Committing to policy changes means dealing with what you already know, inviting input from schools to identify obstacles from their perspective and being flexible to ensure that library policies are education friendly.

### Examples of Policy Obstacles

- Fines for overdue books
- The need for a parent's signature to get a library card
- Enrollment processes that require a visit to the library

### Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

- Eliminate fines on special student cards which may also limit the number of resources that can be checked out at one time.
- Waive any existing fines to give students a clean slate for using a new student card.
- Issue virtual cards using student IDs automatically without the need for parental signatures — giving parents an opportunity to opt-out of the automatic card if they choose.
- Distribute cards to schools where teachers give them to students and talk about library resources and how to use the card.

# 7. Develop a Data-Sharing Strategy and Agreement

A willingness to share basic student directory information is an important component of a successful partnership. Data sharing between library and school systems is built on a clear understanding of laws, policies and practices that protect student privacy, technical expertise to ensure smooth and accurate data transfer and patience.

## Importance of Sharing Student Directory Information

With increased recognition of the benefits of virtual library cards using student IDs, being able to share student directory information is vital to ensuring library access for all students.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is the primary federal law that protects the privacy of educational records. While FERPA was initially viewed as a significant obstacle to data sharing, committed partners have found ways to work within FERPA guidelines to achieve shared goals.

A data sharing agreement for distributing library cards provides a foundation for deeper data sharing to assess longer-term impacts of increased library use. Despite the initial resistance to sharing student data in some communities, leaders found that where there is a will to share data, there is a way to get it done together.

## Five Steps for Developing a Data-Sharing Strategy

1. Start with a conversation among the partnership leaders – chief elected official, school superintendent and library director– about the value of sharing basic student information to support the collaborative work.
2. Get legal advice to clarify expectations and limitations, resolve legal obstacles and avoid surprises.
3. Involve IT staff from both the library and school system early in the process to define technical details and develop and test data-transfer processes.
4. Develop an agreement which covers the details including the purpose for which the information will be used, data fields to be shared, the process for exchanging data, who will have access to the data and the library's commitment to protect privacy of the shared data.
5. Involve key decision makers in the data agreement. In some communities, a signed agreement between the school superintendent and library director may be sufficient. Others may require sign-off by the Board of Education.

## 8. Involve Teachers

When teachers know that every student has a library card, they are able to use library resources in the classroom, recommend library learning tools for homework and research projects and make the library part of the curriculum without fear of leaving anyone out. Library leaders have found that teachers are often the best voice about the value of the library in day-to-day school work.

### How to Involve Teachers

- Create teacher/educator cards to ensure that all teachers have access to the same resources as their students – particularly if some teachers live outside the library service area
- Participate in teacher professional days to ensure that teachers are familiar with library learning resources
- Encourage opportunities for regular discussions between teachers and library staff focusing on how the library can support classroom learning (rather than on what the library does)
- Ask teachers about how the library can best support school curricula
- Respond to formal and informal feedback to ensure that teachers know their voices are valued
- Develop a teacher/educator newsletter to share library information that is relevant to teachers to strengthen their connection to the library and its programs



## 9. Be Patient, Persistent and Flexible

Collaboration takes time. Plans change. People change. Lessons are learned. Some library systems have found that an incremental approach to getting library cards into the hands of children provides small-scale progress and useful lessons to guide the next roll out.

### **Sustaining the Partnership's Momentum**

The biggest obstacle to sustained progress is turn-over among top leaders. That's why it's particularly important to create an infrastructure for collaboration and identify supporting players who can sustain the momentum while new leaders learn about and embrace the overall strategy.

Building and sustaining a high-level partnership that puts children first in the community and produces long-term impacts is a marathon rather than a sprint. And the library is the anchor that sustains the momentum in the midst of changing leadership, new challenges, political obstacles and waning interest.

### **Examples of Incremental Approaches**

Incremental approaches include focusing on:

- One school where there is high interest
- One segment of the student population (e.g., junior high)
- One school district at a time

# 10. Plan for Longer-Term Impact

While keeping an eye on the primary focus of ensuring that all K-12 students use the valuable learning resources at their public library, nurturing the partnership to pursue greater impacts is equally important.

## Benefits of Starting with a Shared Goal

Partnerships that grow out of a shared goal of ensuring library access to improve education outcomes contribute to:

- Increased understanding of the library role in education
- Broader awareness of how library resources complement and enhance learning
- Interest in continued collaborative work beyond library cards
- Good will among key players in the education ecosystem
- A foundation for improved education outcomes

## Examples of Collaborative Opportunities Beyond Library Cards

- Integrating library resources directly into school curricula
- Sharing summer learning data to measure impact
- Targeting high-need schools for extra support
- Focusing on expanding STEM learning opportunities
- Working with schools to identify struggling readers in grades K-3rd who need extra help to improve reading proficiency

“It takes an extraordinary amount of collaboration to ensure that all children have access to the valuable learning resources at their public libraries. We have moved from a cordial relationship between the library and school system, to a working partnership, to a one-year Memorandum of Understanding, to a five-year MOU. It is not an accident that our partnership is where it is today.”

**LEE KEESLER**  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**  
**CHARLOTTE MECKLENBURG LIBRARY**

# Resources

## **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), U.S. Department of Education**

<https://ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>

## **Frequently Asked Questions About FERPA, U.S. Department of Education**

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/pdf/ferpafaq.pdf>

## **The Leaders Library Card Challenge Toolkit**

<https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Toolkit.pdf>

## **Libraries Expanding Summer Opportunities (ULC Leadership Brief)**

[https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Leadership\\_Brief\\_Expanding\\_Summer.pdf](https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Leadership_Brief_Expanding_Summer.pdf)

## **Partners Achieving Community Outcomes (ULC Leadership Brief)**

[https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Leadership\\_Brief\\_Community\\_Outcomes.pdf](https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Leadership_Brief_Community_Outcomes.pdf)

## **Partners for Education (ULC Leadership Brief)**

[https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Partners\\_for\\_Education.pdf](https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/Partners_for_Education.pdf)

## **Public Partners for Early Literacy: Library-School Partners Closing Opportunity Gaps**

[https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/ULC\\_Opportunity\\_Gap\\_Report.pdf](https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/ULC_Opportunity_Gap_Report.pdf)

## **Stepping up to the ConnectED Library Challenge: A Call to Action**

<https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/imls-connected-report-2016.pdf>

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### WE WISH TO RECOGNIZE:

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- The Council of the Great City Schools for their partnership and recognition of the value of public schools and public libraries joining together on behalf of children.

### ABOUT THE URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

The Urban Libraries Council, founded in 1971, is the voice for public libraries and the force that inspires them to evolve. ULC creates the tools, techniques and ideas to make ongoing improvements and upgrades in services and technology. ULC also speaks loudly and clearly about the value public libraries bring to communities, and secures funding for research that results in the development of new programs and services. By serving as a forum for library leadership, ULC produces innovative ideas and best practices that ensure community impact.