



Leadership Brief: Library-School Partnerships to Improve Reading Proficiency

ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

This Leadership Brief examines the power of intentional library-school partnerships to improve reading proficiency among children most in need of assistance. It highlights how libraries are already helping low-income children become more proficient readers and offers action strategies for strengthening library-school partnerships to close the reading opportunity gap.

OVERVIEW: Despite widespread agreement that grade-level reading is critical to academic, economic and life success, many children are failing to reach the essential third-grade reading benchmark. The risk is particularly acute for low-income children. Only 18 percent of low-income fourth graders scored at or above the proficient level on the 2017 National Assessment of Education Progress (compared with 37 percent of all fourth graders).¹

Recent experience has shown that when libraries and schools work together in an intentional way children most in need of assistance can make progress toward achieving key education goals. Over the past three years, elected, school and library leaders in more than 100 communities worked together through the Leaders Library Card Challenge to help over 3 million students gain library cards and significantly increase their use of library resources.² This work demonstrates the potential of library-school partnerships to improve education outcomes for all – including achieving the critical third-grade reading benchmark.

This Leadership Brief grows out of three strands of current practice related to grade-level reading proficiency:

1. The urgency of focusing on kindergarten through third grade as a pivotal time period for helping struggling readers become proficient readers — before they enter fourth grade, when kids transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*.
2. The progressive work of libraries as education leaders with unique capacities to support low-income young readers in ways that complement and enhance classroom learning.
3. The benefits of schools and libraries collaborating in a more seamless and intentional way to help low-income students achieve the critical third-grade reading benchmark.³

“We can’t do this work alone. The impetus for bringing libraries and schools together in urban areas is to get both pulling in the same direction to improve reading proficiency for all children.”

— Michael Casserly, Executive Director, Council of the Great City Schools



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WHY EARLY READING PROFICIENCY IS KEY

Third grade is a critical turning point.

Children who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school or fail to graduate, which can lead to a lifetime of social and economic disadvantages.⁴

Low-income children face hurdles to academic success.

Challenges that contribute to poor education outcomes for low-income children include parents with limited reading or English language skills and little time to address their children's learning needs; absence of books at home; and day-to-day life challenges such as food, housing, transportation and health care insecurities.

Kindergarten through third grade is a make-or-break time period for struggling readers.

Since many children from low-income families start kindergarten about six months behind their middle-class peers,⁵ years spent in kindergarten through third grade are critical for making up ground and building fundamental reading skills.

Children with the greatest need for out-of-school support are often the hardest to reach.

Without proactive and persistent outreach and strategic connections between sources of supplemental assistance and classroom teachers, struggling readers are likely to fall further behind.

When libraries and schools work together, struggling readers and their families benefit.

Working together, libraries and schools can ensure that all kindergarten through third-grade readers have access to library learning resources and literacy activities to increase their chances of becoming proficient readers. In addition, intentional library-school partnerships provide a more seamless connection between classroom and library learning for young readers and their families.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES SUPPORT IMPROVED READING PROFICIENCY

Libraries have already stepped up to the reading challenge, bringing a wealth of assets and expertise

to meet community education needs. Their status as safe, trusted community hubs makes them particularly valuable resources for low-income students who need extra support. In addition, libraries look and feel different from schools which can be particularly helpful for children who aren't successful in the classroom.

Libraries support reading improvement among low-income kindergarten through third-grade readers by:

Providing High-Quality Summer Learning Opportunities

To ensure that children most in need of support participate in summer learning, libraries get referrals from teachers and schools, do targeted outreach in specific neighborhoods and offer learning activities at locations where low-income children spend time such as child-care facilities, public housing sites and Title I schools.

Supporting Family Learning

Libraries have embraced the power of two-generation learning that fosters stronger family bonds, equips parents to support their children's reading progress, encourages family engagement in school activities and helps build an at-home culture of reading.

Bringing Books and Learning Resources to Children, Families and Schools

Children from low-income families are less likely to have books in their homes, which inhibits independent reading and slows down skill building. Significant reductions in (or even eliminations of) school libraries have exacerbated the book gap for children from low-income families. Public libraries are closing the gap by supplementing school libraries, opening libraries in schools, ensuring that all children have library cards and giving books to children for at-home reading.

Delivering Personalized Learning

Public libraries are experts in personalized learning, which is particularly effective in helping readers who struggle in traditional classrooms. Libraries leverage their program flexibility to meet each student's learning needs, using one-on-one tutoring, small-group read-aloud sessions and technology tools to strengthen literacy fundamentals.

Nurturing a Love of Reading

When children read because they love to, not just because they have to, they are likely to become stronger readers. To nurture reading enjoyment as a path to improved proficiency, libraries incorporate games, incentives, rewards and celebrations into learning programs to keep children involved and engaged in reading.

The following examples illustrate how six libraries are helping struggling young readers make progress toward the third-grade benchmark.

- ▶ **Richland Public Library's** Project Summer Slide is a four-week, four-days-a-week summer camp for first-through third-grade children held at an elementary school that is also a summer food service program site. Teachers lead literacy activities three days a week, and the library coordinates one-on-one tutoring on the fourth day.
- ▶ **San Mateo County Libraries** offers two-generation learning opportunities in underserved communities focusing on helping children meet the third-grade reading benchmark. The library engages Spanish-speaking families in weekly two-generation learning sessions to build English language skills, improve reading and increase family leadership and community engagement.
- ▶ **Cuyahoga County Public Library's** 1-2-3 Read program provides afterschool one-on-one and small group literacy development for first-, second- and third-grade students who are identified by their school district as at risk of not meeting the Ohio Third-Grade Reading Guarantee, the state's required benchmark for fourth-grade promotion. Children participate in two 75-minute sessions each week during the academic year.
- ▶ **Montgomery County Public Libraries'** Reading Buddies program pairs students identified by teachers as needing extra reading help with trained high-school tutors. To encourage attendance, school and library staff work together to schedule weekly two-hour reading sessions and provide round-trip bus transportation from the school to the library.
- ▶ **Free Library of Philadelphia** delivers book nooks to community gathering places such as barbershops, laundromats and supermarkets to ensure that

books are easily accessible in everyday places and to create fun read-together zones where struggling readers and their families gather for other activities.

- ▶ **Multnomah County Library's** Books 2 U is an in-classroom program that delivers inspiration and books directly to schools with concentrations of low-income children. The program enlivens classrooms in the lowest performing schools with high-energy presentations that introduce characters and stories in ways that motivate kids to continue reading at home.

LIBRARY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FOR EARLY LITERACY SUCCESS

Close collaboration between schools and libraries can help struggling readers stay the course on their learning journeys by drawing on a coordinated network of support from community anchor institutions. When school and library staff are in sync, children and parents of struggling readers are able to maximize out-of-school time to complement classroom work.

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL-LIBRARY PARTNERSHIPS

- ▶ Mutual respect and trust between leaders of both the library and school systems
- ▶ An explicit commitment between the library director and school superintendent to work together
- ▶ Understanding of how each system works – how they are different and how they can complement each other
- ▶ Clearly defined roles and expectations in a memorandum of understanding to ensure that the commitment to collaborate continues even if personnel change
- ▶ Flexibility to adapt to changing needs, expectations, external pressures and new challenges
- ▶ An open mind and a “get-it-done” attitude

ACTION STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING LIBRARY AND SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Ensure that meeting the literacy needs of struggling, low-income kindergarten through third-grade readers is a visible library priority.

Libraries have a unique set of capacities and connections that make them ideal resources to help students overcome obstacles to reading success. When schools understand that literacy for kindergarten through third-grade readers is a library priority, they are more likely to match struggling readers with opportunities at the library.

Provide literacy services outside the library, where children and families spend time.

Bringing library programs, services and resources to places where young readers spend time with their families makes participation easier and increases the likelihood of sustained participation. Close collaboration with teachers in neighborhood schools and community organizations that serve low-income audiences supports successful outreach.

Include community resources for families as part of kindergarten through third-grade literacy programs.

Libraries offer opportunities for parents to connect with other parents, build social capital and become more engaged in their kids' literacy work. When parents can take advantage of resources to support family well-being while children work on reading skills their participation has multiple benefits.

Create consistent terminology and complementary resources between schools and libraries.

Successful connections between library resources and school curricula begin with an understanding of how schools in the library service area teach and assess reading proficiency. This helps ensure that library resources complement classroom work and make sense to parents.

Ensure partnerships are sustainable.

Experience shows that library-school partnerships that start with a leadership-level commitment to work together on a specific goal produce the best results. Some library and school leaders have found that starting small – collaborative work in one school or with one age group – is the most productive way to develop and test working relations, identify and resolve obstacles and learn from a pilot experience to provide a foundation for system-wide collaboration.

GETTING STARTED

Below are initial action steps for creating or strengthening the school-library partnership to support struggling kindergarten through third-grade readers.

- ▶ Share this report with school leaders and other community stakeholders.
- ▶ Convene school and library leaders to discuss opportunities to address the needs of struggling low-income kindergarten through third-grade readers.
- ▶ Identify and address obstacles that may interfere with successful collaboration.
- ▶ Develop a memorandum of understanding to define general parameters for an enhanced school-library partnership.
- ▶ Agree on at least one action step to launch the collaboration and designate lead library and school staff to get the ball rolling.
- ▶ Take the first step!

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. For more information, visit urbanlibraries.org.

¹ 2017 NAEP Report Card. <https://nationsreportcard.gov>.

² *The Leaders Library Card Challenge: Creating High-Level Partnerships to Improve Education Outcomes*. <https://www.urbanlibraries.org/files/LLCC-Strategic-Guide.pdf>.

³ The information in this report emerged from a National Forum on Closing the Opportunity Gap for early readers, convened by ULC and the Council of the Great City Schools with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/ULC_Opportunity_Gap_Report.pdf.

⁴ Hernandez, Donald J. *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation Rates* (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

⁵ K. L. Alexander, D. R. Entwisle and L. S. Olson. "Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap," *American Sociological Review* 72, no.2 (2007), 167-80.