



Family Learning and Literacy in Urban Settings:

Lessons from a Network of Informal Learning and Community-Based Organizations

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY TO THE [FULL REPORT](#)

The Informal Learning Initiative (ILI) is a network of projects that provides community-based, literacy-rich learning experiences for families with young children in Philadelphia. The network has included 11 different partnerships consisting of informal learning organizations (ILOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs). Key aspects of informal learning programming for families included a content focus in areas such as science, art, or health and wellness, reading and other literacy activities, caregiver-child joint participation, and activities that support rich inter-generational learning talk. Additionally, ILI programs were designed around the needs of families, incorporating meals, community-based locations, and providing experiences for children, siblings, and caretakers.

Child impacts

Children who participated in ILI were exposed to new topics and themes in a range of content areas. Findings from structured program observations suggest that children enjoyed the programs and showed overall high levels of engagement in, and completion of, program activities. Programs provided opportunities to engage in rich learning conversations with informal educators and caregivers—a critical component of informal learning experiences. Observations documented many conversations in which children and adults used content-specific vocabulary and concepts as they described, questioned, labeled, connected, and explained what they were learning. Interviews with children and caregivers suggested that children remembered what they learned and sometimes extended that learning at home.

Caregiver impacts

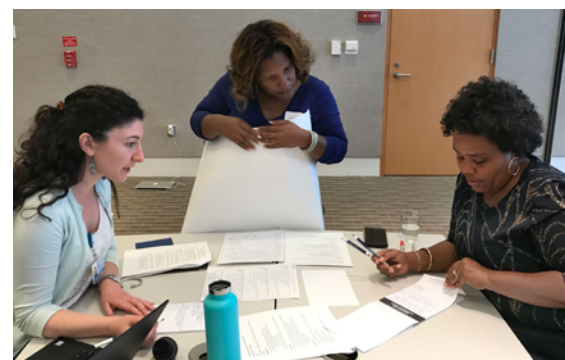
Caregivers learned new strategies to support children’s reading and learning at home. They felt welcomed and connected to the programs, which they found responsive to their needs. They formed relationships with educators and other families. These are important outcomes that empower caregivers to be brokers and advocates for their children’s informal learning. Supporting caregiver engagement is an area that programs are actively seeking to improve. Caregiver engagement could be strengthened by programming that engages adults as learners, not just as facilitators of their children’s learning.

Partnerships

Each project in the ILI network is a partnership between ILOs and CBOs. Partnerships were a common organizational practice for both ILOs and CBOs, but many began their ILI work with a typical outreach model in mind, where the ILO delivers programming to audiences recruited by the CBO. By the third year of ILI, projects increasingly framed partnership as an opportunity to learn about each other’s practice, often in ways that centered families and communities. We saw this move towards joint work in the evolution of co-design and in the mix of ILO and CBO staff who delivered programming. Still, joint work is an ongoing challenge that all partnerships have to negotiate and renegotiate.

Network learning

The network and learning community was a key driver for the success of ILI. Network activities responded to the evolving needs of partnerships and supported reflection connected to program



Top: Children had opportunities to engage in conversations with adults while learning.

Middle: A bilingual educator shares vocabulary words with children as part of a read aloud.

Bottom: Many aspects of programming are being visited and revisited in the network.

design. Staff from CBOs and ILOs appreciated the opportunity to learn from the work of colleagues – a rare opportunity for professional development in the non-profit education and community service sectors. Shared problems of practice were workshopped, from logistical challenges of transportation and food, to programmatic challenges of how to infuse literacy, engage caregivers, and be culturally responsive. Although greatly valued by participants, it is worth noting that maintaining a network and learning community requires significant time and effort.

We see the lessons of ILI as directly relevant to the question of how to support healthy urban ecosystems for informal learning. Education is a systems-level problem that goes far beyond schools to involve all aspects of life, including families, neighborhoods, and communities. Our study of ILI examines how ILOs can be better connected to collective impact efforts in literacy and how informal learning programming can be re-oriented to be more responsive to community needs. ILI has made a positive impact on Philadelphia’s educational ecosystem so far, and there is potential for greater impact as the network identifies and collaborates on areas for improvement.



LEARN MORE

Read the full report [here](#).

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