

October 2024



Philadelphia as a Literacy-Rich Environment:

Unlocking Potential and Creating Change



This brief was written by
The Learning Agenda (TLA) as part of its
facilitation of a three-year Community of Practice
among the William Penn Foundation Literacy-Rich
Environments grantee partners. Through dialogue
at meetings and focus groups, Community of Practice partners
generated the content, which TLA then compiled to create this brief.
The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author
and do not necessarily reflect the views
of the William Penn Foundation.





About This Brief

Launched in 2015, the William Penn Foundation’s **Literacy-Rich Environments (LRE) Initiative** activated a diverse array of learning partners across the City of Philadelphia to infuse literacy-rich opportunities and experiences in informal learning settings and everyday spaces. The reimagined settings enabled children to engage in literacy exploration throughout their days – waiting for the bus, visiting a museum or library, attending an afterschool program. In doing so, the LRE Initiative strove to promote equity of opportunity to experience literacy-skill building across the broad demographic of families and children in the city.

A Community of Practice among the LRE grantee partners worked on collaboratively identifying what it takes to create and scale specific literacy-rich environments. This brief includes an exploration of what this community discovered in working together by first defining a set of five environmental conditions that need to be in place across a city to enable and optimize literacy-rich environments in all the everyday places and spaces where children and their caregivers spend time. It concludes with a series of recommendations for what funders and other stakeholders can do to support the establishment and cultivation of literacy-rich environments across a city.

What is a literacy-rich environment?

A literacy-rich environment takes an existing setting and infuses language and reading prompts, activities, and games into that space to make it literacy-rich. Many of these literacy-rich environments are informed by the concept of playful learning. This refers to the type of play in which children are actively exploring an engaging activity embedded in a relevant, meaningful context where the learning goals are intentionally integrated into play from the outset, and when they are guided by an adult or the environment itself, toward a particular learning goal. While diverse in nature, all the William Penn Foundation LRE grantees embraced playful learning as central to their work.

Leveraging Philadelphia’s Assets to Improve Literacy

Early literacy is foundational to successful learning and development. Yet many young children do not have equitable access to literacy-rich environments outside the school day (e.g., museums, science centers, high-quality afterschool and summer programming) that foster a broad range of skills, including those needed to attain reading proficiency by the end of third grade. This is a critical milestone because fourth grade academic standards assume students have already learned to read and, therefore, require them to “read to learn.”¹ Reading to learn is not only a critical milestone to be an effective fourth grader but also a predictor of high school success. Students who have not learned to read by fourth grade are four times more likely to drop out of school before high school graduation.

When the LRE Initiative began in 2015, the percentage of fourth grade students in Philadelphia who performed “at or above” the NAEP proficient level was only 14%. This was in contrast to the national average for “at or above proficient” being 35%. And these numbers were even more dramatic when broken down by demographics: Students who were eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch, an indicator of low family income, had an average score that was 14 points lower than that for students who were not eligible.²

While high-quality preschool and early elementary programs are necessary early literacy supports for children, most young children in the United States only spend about 20% of their waking hours in formal classroom settings. This leaves an enormous opportunity to leverage the assets of community-based organizations, libraries, museums, and community centers to play a prominent role in providing literacy-rich settings that help children build language skills in the summer, after school, and on weekends. Education leaders and city planners also can join together and recognize that spaces — such as parks, grocery stores, buses, laundromats, and waiting rooms — where families spend their time can be designed and leveraged to include literacy-focused and fun activities. These activities are designed to be engaging, meaningful, and relevant to families’ lives, incorporating the elements of playful learning that research has proven to be impactful for young learners. Capitalizing on this opportunity, the William Penn Foundation supported the

¹ Center for Public Education. (2015, March). *Learning to read, reading to learn: Why third grade is a pivotal year for mastering literacy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-learning-to-read-reading-to-learn-white-paper-2015.pdf>

² The Nation’s Report Card. (n.d.). *2015 Reading Trial Urban District snapshot report: Philadelphia, Grade 4, Public Schools*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2015/pdf/2016048XP4.pdf>



LRE Initiative with the goal that all Philadelphia families will live in neighborhoods with interactive elements and installations (e.g., signage at bus stops, literacy-focused playgrounds) and programs for children ages birth to eight that build literacy and language skills through playful learning.

The LRE Initiative included investments in planning, implementation, and evaluation and employed three primary funding approaches:

To **support the creation of interactive installations** that are active, engaging, content-rich, and likely to facilitate children’s development and literacy skill-building. This included investments in transforming bus stops, laundromats, and medical waiting spaces into playful learning places where children and their caregivers were exposed to literacy skill-building activities.

To **create opportunities to embed or strengthen literacy programming outside of school** where children spend 80% of their time. These investments included creating high-quality literacy programming in informal learning settings, improving the overall quality of those settings, and strengthening partnerships among community-based organizations, cultural institutions, and city agencies to leverage resources and better serve children and their caregivers.

To **invest in research, evaluation, and communication** to assess impact, guide improvements, and communicate results to promote awareness of the need and best practices for creating literacy-rich environments. Therefore, programmatic investments were often coupled with research and evaluation projects, and grantees were



encouraged to share their emerging findings to contribute to the growing knowledge base about literacy-rich environments.

Central to the LRE Initiative was a commitment to evaluation, peer learning, and collaboration. In 2020, two grantee partner meetings were held to explore if and how they would like to work more collaboratively on a shared research agenda. An outcome of these convenings was interest among the partners in continuing to connect and share promising practices and evaluation approaches that advanced the role of literacy-rich environments as one of the key components of a comprehensive approach to addressing Philadelphia's reading crisis.

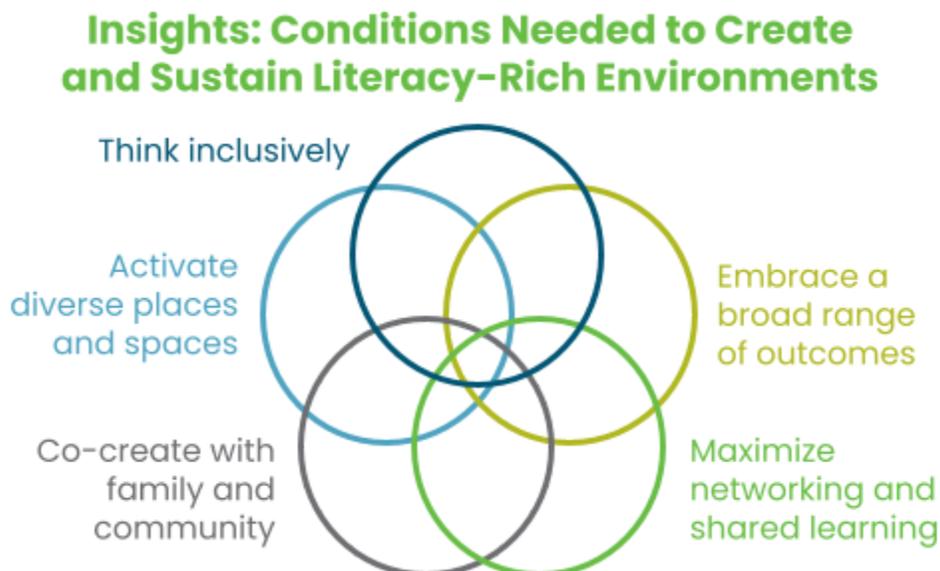
Therefore, in 2022, [The Learning Agenda](#), a consulting firm that works with philanthropies, nonprofits, and educators to expand equitable learning opportunities within and outside of schools, was engaged to facilitate a Community of Practice (CoP). A goal of the CoP was to engage the researchers, evaluators, and practitioners funded as part of the LRE portfolio in sharing strategies and questions emerging from their work to create a body of evidence in support of literacy-rich environments for young children. While much of the work to create a literacy-rich ecosystem in Philadelphia is still underway and entering its third year, the LRE CoP partners expressed interest in sharing insights on what they had learned about the environmental conditions in Philadelphia that were emerging as central to their efforts to create and scale literacy-rich environments across the city. Through a collaborative and iterative process, they created this brief so that funders and other stakeholders could benefit from what they learned. It is intended to inform decisions that result in a more systemic, citywide approach to creating, funding, and scaling literacy-rich environments.

Five Emergent Conditions for Citywide Approaches to Creating and Scaling Literacy-Rich Environments

Much is known about how to create specific programs and settings that promote literacy. But creating and scaling literacy-rich environments across a city is a complex process that only becomes possible with stable funding and involves much more in terms of community buy-in and collaborative leadership. Based on the experiences of members of the LRE CoP, it requires recognizing and encouraging all the places and spaces across a city where caregivers and their children tend to gravitate to be part of an ecosystem of literacy-rich environments that is co-created with community members, as well as supporting a broad range of outcomes that collectively improve literacy.

LRE CoP partners identified the following five insights that unpack the conditions needed for establishing and cultivating literacy-rich environments:

1. Be inclusive of all the potential places and people that can contribute to a literacy-rich ecosystem
2. Activate literacy-rich environments in the places and spaces where children and their caregivers naturally are or want to be
3. Co-create literacy-rich environments with family and community members
4. Embrace a broad range of outcomes
5. Maximize collaboration, networking, and shared learning



As depicted, these five conditions are interrelated and interdependent. For example, an inclusive ecosystem will consist of diverse literacy-rich environments, each with its own outcomes that reflect the ultimate goal of improved literacy. However, to fully unpack each condition, we describe them separately, drawing on illustrative examples from the LRE partners in Philadelphia.

1 Be inclusive of all the potential places and people who can contribute to a literacy-rich ecosystem

Ecosystem thinking embraces the belief that learning happens everywhere and that every adult – from teachers to community partners to family members – in every setting where children and caregivers spend their time has shared ownership for learning and development. In the context of literacy-rich environments, this means being inclusive of the full complement of a city’s youth- and family-serving institutions, such as government agencies, schools, community-based organizations, libraries, art museums, parks, laundromats, barber shops, etc., and emphasizing connection, collaboration, and shared responsibility for promoting and providing literacy-rich environments among stakeholders.



Informal learning organizations such as museums and libraries are ripe for partnerships with community-based organizations and early childhood learning centers to promote literacy-rich environments. Doing so broadens the opportunities for families and children to experience literacy-rich environments beyond the “usual” suspects (e.g., early childhood centers and schools) to include community organizations and institutions that can provide relevant disciplinary content (e.g., art, science, music) to

community-based literacy-rich environments. Recognizing the role that they can play in supporting literacy means helping informal learning and other organizations see themselves as part of the solution to supporting literacy development through their programming.

For example, the **Informal Learning Initiative** — a project guided by the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Learning in Out of School Environments (**UPCLOSE**) — pairs a cultural institution, such as Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial or The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, with at least one community-based organization that has strong relationships with families, such as Sunrise of Philadelphia, Congreso de Latinos Unidos, or ASPIRA Inc. of Pennsylvania. Together, they co-design a series of learning opportunities to engage children and their caregivers in literacy-infused informal learning experiences. The partnerships are vehicles to bring early learning programming directly to families in ways that not only engage children but also center adult caregivers as active participants and learners. Supported by UPCLOSE and enriched by the Children’s Literacy Initiative and the Fred Rogers Institute, all partners involved in the initiative comprise a learning network, and findings suggest that cross-project learning and collaboration had a positive impact. Families who participated in programming over time also developed positive relationships with informal educators and became more aware of, and trusting of, cultural institutions in the city. Findings also explore the challenges and benefits of partnerships engaged in joint work as part of a network and learning community.



Considering the literacy-rich landscape in a city as an ecosystem has many advantages. The more programs, systems, and settings that share ownership for and contribute to creating and maintaining literacy-rich environments, the broader base of community support they will collectively garner. Connecting the full ecosystem of literacy-rich environments across a city can help manage resources more efficiently and potentially reduce duplication of efforts. It can also help identify and close gaps in opportunities, ensuring equitable access to literacy-rich environments in the many places and spaces where families and children spend their time. Importantly, being part of an ecosystem of support can help identify new partners to amplify the work, offering multiple ways to connect and collaborate with the shared goal of promoting literacy-rich environments.

Creating Playful, Literacy-Rich Waiting Areas Across Philadelphia illustrates how the assets of cross-sector partners were leveraged to support families and communities. This

project, led by [Too Small to Fail](#), the early childhood initiative at the [Clinton Foundation](#), engaged city agencies including the Department of Public Health and Office of Homeless Services in neighborhoods throughout Philadelphia to create language and learning opportunities in the many spaces where families spend time.



Monthly partner meetings ensured the inclusion of agency, provider, stakeholder, and community voice in all key decisions regarding space design and project implementation. Community input design surveys allowed families to provide specific feedback on what they hoped to see from the space transformation, including their insights on everything from color choices to book curation. Through the community input surveys families shared how they interact with the agency waiting areas and each other while receiving city-funded services. Content development was done alongside [Read by 4th](#), a local initiative focused on early literacy across Philadelphia that is aligned with the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.



Creating a literacy-rich ecosystem requires champions at multiple levels across the many organizations and institutions that have an interest in promoting literacy and healthy families. When directors, mid-level managers, and on-the-ground staff, as well as funders are all working on a common agenda, they can more easily leverage and mutually reinforce each other's work so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Demonstrating

impact becomes a shared responsibility, with each ecosystem member contributing to the larger narrative around success. The LRE CoP is a good example of how diverse partners were able to come together to demonstrate how their projects contributed to goals around improved literacy skills and kindergarten readiness without any one project being solely accountable for these goals.

2 Activate literacy-rich environments in the places and spaces where children and their caregivers naturally are or want to be

The fact that children spend almost 80% of their time outside of a formal school setting presents an enormous opportunity to capitalize on the potential of activating all the places where they do spend time to become literacy-rich environments. Grocery stores, parks and playgrounds, barbershops, pediatricians' offices, health centers, bus stops, laundromats, and government and social services offices are some of the many places where children and their caregivers spend time during their day that are ripe for being transformed into places to practice literacy skills.

Activating literacy-rich environments in places with built in “wait times,” such as laundromats, medical offices, bus stops, and social service agencies, maximizes the potential of these spaces

to contribute to learning. And because these locations tend to be places that are proximal to familial needs, families tend to frequent them on a regular basis and dwell in them long enough to engage repeatedly with available literacy cues in the environments.





Prompting caregivers to engage with literacy throughout the day has many benefits:

- They can become familiar with the small ways to incorporate literacy in their daily interactions with their children.
- It potentially shifts their mindset about public spaces such as parks and playgrounds as being places to learn, not just to play.
- Caregivers feel more comfortable in institutional settings, which may feel intimidating, when those spaces offer engaging, culturally relevant activities for them to do with their children.
- The literacy prompts and activities in these public settings can transfer to engaging in literacy-promoting behaviors at home during regular routines.



Activating literacy-rich environments in everyday spaces and places requires considering:

Is this a place that caregivers and children frequently visit?

Does transforming the space into an literacy-rich environment fill a community need?

Is being in the space mandatory or voluntary?

Does activating this space to become literacy-rich provide more equitable access to literacy opportunities?

The [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia](#) (CHOP) is a place that many children and caregivers from diverse backgrounds visit on a regular basis. It has transformed its exam rooms into literacy-rich environments so that all caregivers and their children who enter the space have access to and can experience literacy opportunities. At CHOP, the average family waits over 19 minutes before seeing a physician, which can cause frustration for families as they try to juggle multiple demands, entertain children, or calm their anxieties.

[Picture This!](#) works to integrate the built environment of the exam room to meet these needs by providing playful learning activities. As such, it has transformed wait time into an opportunity to model the power of engaged play in a safe, often trusted environment. In medical offices with Picture This! installations, parents and children can interact with mural-sized storybook pages in exam rooms while waiting for their healthcare team. Staff who work in these spaces also benefit, as the installations can help distract and calm children and make families feel less anxious.



Community spaces where children and caregivers spend time are often staffed by interested adults who can facilitate learning and engagement. These adults can play many

different roles from trained professionals such as pediatricians and afterschool staff to volunteers working for community-based organizations and institutions. In their role, it is essential to create a sense of belonging and cultivate the trust of caregivers and children alike while engaging them in fun activities. The [Literacy in the Laundromat](#) initiative is transforming three Philadelphia laundromats into family-friendly environments to promote child-caregiver interactions through playful literacy-rich signage, materials, and activities.



The interactions are facilitated by [Reading Captains](#), trained volunteers from the community who families already know and trust.



Led by **KABOOM!**, in close partnership with **Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network (PLLAN)** and **FabYouthPhilly**, the Playful Learning Ambassador program trained a cohort of paid neighborhood members to help foster playful learning in their communities by transforming everyday spaces such as neighborhood lots and park spaces into interactive play installations. These community members led weekly activations throughout the summer of 2023 with the goal of engaging children and families in playful learning games and activities. An evaluation of the program demonstrated that Playful Learning Ambassadors helped increase caregiver engagement, promoted more physical activity among adults and children, and increased opportunities to support 21st century skills, including innovation, and confidence for children.

The evaluation also found that the Ambassadors reported positive impacts on their feelings of community, belonging, and empowerment as well as positivity about the professional development skills they gained through the program.

3 Co-create literacy-rich environments with families and community members

Engaging families and community members in co-creating literacy-rich environments means they can be active participants in the design and evaluation of literacy experiences that are culturally relevant and meaningful to them while ensuring that designers and evaluators are centering community ideas in their work. This asset-based approach can generate energy and excitement about a project because spaces are more meaningful and relevant when they are co-designed with the community. In turn, this increases the likelihood that families will spend time with their children exploring the literacy opportunities created by the project.



Viewing community members as partners from the very beginning of a project helps them feel valued and heard and requires developing trust and building positive relationships between community members and the people who are partnering with them to create literacy-rich environments. Further, there is a spectrum of engagement that depends on several factors including the size and scope of a project and individual family and community member's capacities to engage. It is important to understand these parameters so a project can "right-size" how to best engage with the community. Involving family and community members from the outset can support long-term funding commitments because the community creates demand and becomes mobilized to advocate for sustained resources.

HopePHL partnered with the **PLLAN** and My Baby's First Teacher to create **Everyday Learning Play Spaces** (ELPS), an initiative to create playful learning installations and developmentally appropriate spaces for children and families experiencing homelessness. ELPS is focusing on the 11 Philadelphia shelters with the greatest population of children and families, and the project team has worked extensively to co-create unique designs that are responsive to the needs of each space. For example, the basement level at Families Forward has housing for families, and staff and families expressed that they would love to see color and light and feel hope and playfulness in this space. So ELPS worked with a muralist to create a 12-foot-long mural depicting families cooking outdoors, children running races with alligators in party hats, families reading, and children playing





double Dutch. The families chose the activities to be depicted by the artist and gave feedback throughout the process. Each shelter is embarking on a similar process, and each design goes through a review to ensure that it is aligned with the [playful learning model](#) and follows trauma-informed design principles (that is, principles that take into consideration the negative consequences from potentially dangerous lived experiences).

Part of engaging family and community members is understanding their definition of “community.” As ideas for a new literacy-rich environment are generated, enlisting community members in defining their community and then asking them what they need to help their children be successful learners is an important first step. While in some places, “community” is defined as a specific neighborhood, other groups may consider their “community” in terms of a place such as a specific housing project, or it could be situational such as families who send their children to the same school. At [Puentes deSalud](#), the community comes together because of a shared culture, even though they may live in different parts of the city. In partnership with the Barnes Foundation, its Bridges to the Arts program works with emerging bilingual Latino students ages three to five and their caregivers across Philadelphia, using art to develop children's early literacy skills in Spanish and English. Afterschool program sessions include interactive read-alouds, art viewing, and art making that encourage conversation and shared creative exploration. The program also includes family arts and literacy workshops on weekends for program families.

Meaningful engagement requires regular and sustained communication with community members throughout the entire design, implementation, and evaluation process. It is more than just one community meeting or “checking the community engagement box” and



requires time and commitment to keep up the momentum. For example, the [Playful Learning Landscapes](#) model includes a commitment to community engagement designed to uncover all the elements that make a community unique, including its history, culture, values, and hopes for the future. PLLAN partners with community-based organizations to design and implement a community engagement process that fits the needs of the project and the people. This process typically includes community mobilization, identification of stakeholders, the co-design process, and prototype testing. PLLAN uses playful learning games and activities as tools throughout the community engagement process to create playful learning experiences for the community while also eliciting rich data to inform design. With these strategies, PLLAN helps organizations create playful learning landscapes that reflect their communities.

In addition to community engagement throughout the life of a project, dedicated thought and planning around the transition or next steps with the installation project or program are important to consider with the community in advance of wrapping up a project. For example, [KABOOM!'s Play Everywhere Philly program](#), a citywide challenge to create playful learning spaces that support child development and literacy skills in everyday locations across Philadelphia, will not simply end after the installations are built and open to the public. PLLAN, a Play Everywhere Philly project partner, will help community organizations to plan for playful learning activation and programming at the sites in the months after their opening celebrations, in conjunction with [PopUpPlay](#). This ongoing programmatic support will enhance, amplify, and extend the learning opportunities for children and families – building on the physical installation elements that are designed to prompt literacy skill-building and playful learning. This initial support is designed to build



capacity within the grantee organizations, developing skills internally for thinking strategically about activating and maintaining their sites after the project is completed.

It's important to recognize that there will be some playful learning installations and spaces with a set end point. Planning for the “exit strategy” or conclusion of programming is an important part of the strategizing process. For example, will physical structures need to be removed and transported to a different location? Will this process require a portion of the planned budget to be used on this effort? What will the space look like and act as for the community once the programming or installation is taken away? These are all important questions to ask in the co-creation process.

4 Embrace a broad range of outcomes across your literacy-rich environment ecosystem

While increased literacy skills are a main goal of many literacy-rich environments, not all programs and initiatives need to, or even should, directly measure literacy levels or grade-level reading achievement. There are multiple ways to define what constitutes the “success” of literacy-rich environments, as demonstrated by the diversity of projects in the William Penn Foundation’s LRE Initiative that collectively contributed to an overall theory of change. While skills acquisition is important to measure in some contexts, the primary goal of the LRE Initiative projects in Philadelphia was to expand the conditions that contribute to improved literacy skills.

For example, some of the projects in the LRE Initiative explored non-academic skill development such as increased engagement in literacy activities. Others expanded the unit of change beyond children to examine outcomes such as increased staff knowledge

and skills, improved caregiver knowledge and attitudes about learning opportunities, and increased quantity and quality of caregiver and child language use. Some projects also explored the quality of the environment itself.

What Children Learn: The “6 C’s” Approach to Education

Engaging in literacy-rich environments helps children develop the important social, emotional, and relational skills needed for their early language development and to be successful in school and in life. The [Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network](#) refers to these skills as the 6 C’s: [collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence](#).



From *“BECOMING BRILLIANT: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children,”*
Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Ph.D. and Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D.

Many of the LRE Initiative grantees in Philadelphia have embraced this framework to evaluate the outcomes of their projects. For example, in evaluating multiple years of the summer [Playstreets program](#), researchers found that children who worked with Play Captains from [Fab Youth Philly](#) exhibited higher levels of these important 6 C skills



compared to when Play Captains were not present on the streets. Additionally, in the Play Everywhere Philly project, researchers went to the various playful learning installations around the city. They studied the amount of 6 C's being exhibited at these sites before and after installation was complete. They found that children displayed more of the behaviors associated with the development of the 6 C's when the Play Everywhere installations were up compared to pre-installation.

Exploring Staff Behaviors and Program Quality

The National Institute for Out-of-School Time (NIOST) helped out-of school time programs enhance the quality of their literacy programming by encouraging them to include a number of new activities in their programs, including: a writing club, journaling, audiobooks, read-alouds and discussions, a literacy corner, sight word games, word of the day, acrostic poems, and storytelling. They also included professional development opportunities. Understanding that staff are integral to implementing high-quality programming, researchers at NIOST collected information on staff members' perceptions and confidence about implementing literacy skill-building experiences for youth. They found that staff gained confidence to implement early literacy activities, which helped with the quality and quantity of implementation. They also found that the professional development opportunities, including training and coaching, were the most viable pathway toward integrating light-touch literacy practices into organizational culture.

Family, neighborhood, and community-level change

The goal of the **Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative (LRNI)** is for caregivers and children to interact with literacy prompts and activities multiple times a day in their neighborhood



so that literacy techniques such as asking questions, discussing numbers, and reading together become part of a family's everyday routine. A primary component of the initiative is to engage community members in designing the activities to ensure that the resulting literacy installations are engaging, relevant, and meaningful to the families and children who live there. The focus of its evaluation is on the breadth and depth of community engagement and literacy practices at the family level (children and caregivers), as well as neighborhood, and cross-community networks. The team is investigating baseline literacy and learning needs and values, and parents' perceptions of community support for children and families at two points in time. The evaluation also is examining how engaging the community in the development of the intervention affects the way the community responds to the intervention, and whether the LRNI has broader impacts across the neighborhood.

Embracing a broad range of outcomes also means adopting a broad set of methods and measures and perhaps collaborating across projects to share data and findings. The LRE research partners employed a variety of research designs, mostly non- and quasi-experimental (pre-post or nonequivalent) groups, and relied on both qualitative and quantitative data to understand how their specific projects were contributing toward a holistic approach to literacy. Observational approaches to data collection were used by a majority of the projects, with many also using interviews and surveys to examine a broad range of outcomes.

The power of embracing a broad range of outcomes is that it shifts the burden of proof from an individual project to a shared understanding that the collective impact of multiple exposures to literacy-rich environments provides the biggest gains. Another benefit of



embracing a broad set of outcomes is that more stakeholders can see how they “fit” into overall efforts to improve literacy across a city. Indeed, mapping LRE projects onto the theory of change helped the Community of Practice members see how their work contributed to the overall landscape of literacy-rich environments across the city.

5 Maximize collaboration, networking, and shared learning

Thinking about the literacy-rich environments across a city as an ecosystem naturally leads to fostering opportunities for collaboration, networking, and shared learning among the many partners engaged in the work. When organizations collaborate, they can amplify the work of each partner, leveraging each other’s strengths so that their collective impact creates and sustains literacy-rich environments in a way that no one single organization could. Some prominent features of networks are that they offer multiple access points to join; they are participatory in nature, with group members setting the agenda; and they are not prescriptive but rather responsive to community needs. Networks can be incubated and nurtured in several ways.

Sometimes there is an **established coordinating entity**, or a collaborative, often referred to as a backbone organization whose purpose is to promote cross-sector collaboration and alignment among a diverse set of network partners. Often these are larger networks with diverse partners that are committed to working together over time and have the potential to be sustained even when the people and projects in the network turnover.

Through the nationally networked **Campaign for Grade-Level Reading**, Philadelphia and

many other cities and towns across the country have community coalitions that have locally branded and functioning coalitions that support early literacy and grade-level

reading. **Read by 4th** is a powerful citywide coalition of over 100 community and system leaders as well as countless parents, educators, caregivers, and volunteers whose collective mission is to protect Philadelphia’s children’s right to read.

The Read by 4th network comes together across sectors to align work and develop strategies to help young readers at a scale that could never be reached alone. The network pilots adaptive, creative projects that energize literacy citywide. Data, culture, and experience are used to improve the collective work and make sure all initiatives are meaningful. The network’s voice is used to call for change, amplify success, and share resources for all to use.

Most recently, Philadelphia launched a smaller, more focused marketing campaign called **Come Aboard Reading**

Promise Campaign. During the spring and summer of 2023, this effort physically transformed two subway stations, wrapped over 30 buses traveling throughout the city with information about reading, and installed additional advertising on bus stops and inside trains and buses. All these engaging graphics used playful learning strategies to promote early literacy. The messages and graphics were designed to reflect and represent Philadelphia communities and were created with input from a wide array of community members and partners, including PLLAN, Read by 4th, Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA), and Reading Captains.

However, networking and collaboration can happen on a smaller scale among **like-focused organizations** within a larger system of supports. Often these smaller collaborations are time-bound and related to a common project or initiative such as NIOST’s work with a set of out-of-school time providers. The NIOST team facilitated monthly virtual meetings, after each program had





time to watch the training video, put the light-touch literacy practice into use at their program, and meet with their NIOST coach. These meetings were designed to have programs share their learnings, challenges, and successes with one another. The discussions provided staff with creative approaches to lesson planning and alternate ways of delivering literacy skill-building in their programs.

Through sharing challenges with other program leaders, staff could explore modifications to overcome similar obstacles.

Some collaborations are spurred by a funder's commitment to help its grantee partners learn from and share with each other. The LRE CoP is a good example of how a diverse set of community organizations and institutions came together to share innovations, promising practices, and persistent challenges. Further, through the development of this brief, it became a platform for scaling its collective learning broadly to inform others who are seeking to build and sustain literacy-rich environments across a city.

What Funders Can Do

Collectively, the insights gleaned from the LRE CoP members call on funders and other key decision-makers to ensure that literacy-rich environments are created and scaled in ways that render them an essential part of a comprehensive, citywide solution to improving literacy. This may require rethinking current approaches to the design, implementation, and funding of literacy-rich environments, and there are implications for stakeholders as they work to advance literacy-rich environments in their communities.

1. Rethink traditional approaches to grantmaking to allow for meaningful community engagement



Engaging family and community members in program design can be unpredictable and takes time. Therefore, funding literacy-rich environments that are co-created with family and community members necessitates multiyear funding with sufficient planning time to ensure that they feel valued and heard. Meaningful family and community engagement also means adjusting project timelines to accommodate community and family member capacities to engage, which may shift over the course of a project. It may also mean adjusting project goals, as community input may alter the originally conceived design of a project. Importantly, grants need to include funding to compensate community members for regular and sustained engagement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of a project.

2. Invest and engage in community-centered evaluation

A strategy to ensure meaningful community engagement is to invest in community-centered evaluation, which places the needs, interests, and concerns of the community being evaluated at the forefront of the evaluation process. Such an approach needs to engage community members or representatives in the initial design of the evaluation objectives and ensure that evaluation methods are both in line with the stated objectives and do not pose a threat or harm to the community. Community-centered evaluation should be predicated on trust and relationships and may require more time and new approaches than conventional evaluations.

3. Think systemically about the constellation of grants across a city to create a literacy-rich environment ecosystem

As the William Penn Foundation LRE portfolio grew, so did efforts to forge partnerships and networks that shifted the landscape from a discrete set of projects, each working alone, to a more cohesive set of partners that collaborated toward the shared goal of developing a



literacy-rich landscape across Philadelphia. To spur this kind of ecosystem thinking, William Penn Foundation funded a playful learning fellow housed at the City of Philadelphia’s Office of Children and Families whose role it is to support city agencies by creating and facilitating meaningful partnerships to build culturally reflective, play-based installations and curriculum in expected – and unexpected – places in the city.

If, from the outset, funders want to infuse the landscape with literacy-rich environments, it is important to think about how to fund and incentivize partnerships and networks so **grantees see themselves as part of a symbiotic system of supports** aimed at creating and sustaining literacy-rich environments across a city.

4. Educate stakeholders on the value of play

The notion of play is central to literacy-rich environments, yet many associate play with engagement and recreation, not meaningful learning experiences. In fact, the value of play in supporting healthy child development is well-researched. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics “play improves executive functioning skills; promotes the formation of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships; and builds the breadth of skills that children need to thrive in the 21st century.”³ Further, we know that through a **spectrum of play**, which includes free play, guided play, and games, children develop critical competencies and skills needed throughout life, such as creativity, problem-solving, resiliency, collaboration,

³ Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children,” *Pediatrics* 42, no. 3.

and exploration. Play can also enhance children’s educational development, because research demonstrates that young children learn best in active, meaningful, engaged, and socially interactive contexts.”⁴ For literacy-rich environments to take hold in a community, it is essential for stakeholders who are in a position to fund and implement literacy-rich environments to understand that play is a necessary part of holistic child development, cultivating the breadth of skills that children need to be effective, engaged learners.

5. Embrace a theory of change that recognizes the multi-faceted nature of supporting literacy

As evidenced by the diverse partners in the LRE CoP, it is clear that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to activating literacy-rich experiences and opportunities in the places and spaces where caregivers and children tend to gravitate. Relatedly, there is no one set of outcomes that can depict the myriad ways in which engaging with literacy-rich environments supports holistic child development. How, then, do you tell the story that collectively the individual investments add up to meaningful change? One approach is to create a composite theory of change that depicts how individual projects contribute to the ultimate goal of the initiative. This involves identifying key features across LRE projects (such as where they are located, who they are engaging with, what kinds of partnerships they have created) and common kinds of outcomes (child, caregiver, adult practitioner, program, neighborhood, etc.) and mapping how specific projects fit into these categories to contribute to the long-term shared goal. The William Penn Foundation’s theory of change for their LRE Initiative work reflected this multifaceted approach to literacy development. Communities striving to have a robust literacy-rich environment ecosystem can take a similar approach by calling for broadly scoped theories of change that include a variety of strategies working together toward the ultimate outcome of improved literacy.



⁴ Hirsh-Pasek, K., Zosh, J., Golinkoff, R., Gray, J., Robb, M., & Kaufman, J. (2015.) Putting education in educational apps: Lessons from the science of learning. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 16, no. 1, 3– 34.

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[Playful Learning Playbook](#)

Created by [Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network](#), this playbook includes a 10-step guide for activating a playful learning space in one's community and offers examples of playful learning activities from Do-It-Yourself to full-scale, multi-faceted installations. It is available to download for free in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

[Transforming Community Spaces into Opportunities for Playful Learning](#)

Prepared by The [Forum for Youth Investment](#), this brief draws on evaluations of the William Penn Foundation's Literacy-Rich Environments portfolio, as well as insights from LRE partners, to summarize what we know about the benefits of playful learning. It offers insights from the LRE partners on methodological challenges of evaluating playful learning spaces.

[Scaling Strategies for a Playful Learning Movement](#)

Informed by research conducted by a team associated with the Brookings Institution, this report documents the scaling journey to date of [Philadelphia Playful Learning Landscapes](#) (PPLL) and the lessons learned, to help inform further expansion in Philadelphia and with adaptation and adoption by other cities and countries.

[Playful Learning Landscapes Metrics Framework](#)

Based on information gleaned from its work with [Playful Learning Landscapes](#) (PLL) in the US and abroad, this brief from Brookings presents the first iteration of a new metrics framework city-level policymakers, community organizations, the private sector, and philanthropies can use to help assess the positive effects of PLL on learning outcomes, as well as its potential to enhance social interaction and public life in revitalized spaces.

[Accessing the Inaccessible: Redefining Play as a Spectrum](#)

Based on the newest research and with respect to playful learning studies in the past, this [journal article](#) proposes a multidimensional definition of play that creates a spectrum of play opportunities from free play through guided play to games and then playful direct instruction (a form of direct instruction with minor playful elements to try to keep children engaged). This more nuanced definition allows researchers and program implementers alike to better define the mechanisms for playful learning – how and why different types of play are related to various types of outcomes.

[Literacy Resources for Out-of-School Time Programs](#)

Developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), [Coaching to Improve OST Literacy Programming](#) offers early findings from the first five years of NIOST's work with 14 Philadelphia out-of-school time (OST) programs that were part of the Philadelphia Out-of-School Time Literacy and Quality Improvement Initiative. This [research brief](#) provides links to resources curated during the project.

Philadelphia as a Literacy-Rich Environment: Unlocking Potential and Creating Change



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