

# Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative

2020 - 2024

Building on community stories, culture,  
and history to enrich language and literacy  
development in Philadelphia neighborhoods





**Literacy-Rich  
Neighborhoods Initiative**  
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## CONTEXT FOR THIS REPORT

After a four-year project supported by the William Penn Foundation, the technical assistance and evaluation partners (TA providers) of the Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative (LRNI) collaboratively **developed this report to document the lessons learned from—and with—the four Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that led the project in their neighborhoods.**

This report is informed by the experiences of the TA providers working alongside CBOs in planning, design, and implementation; by **interviews** and **community focus groups** with CBOs and their community partners; and by **formal survey data collection**. The findings included in this report are supported by one or more of the technical assistance providers' data and analysis. They represent the consensus that emerged from the TA providers' experiences and evaluation processes, with input from the CBOs. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the William Penn Foundation.



PUENTES DE SALUD



THE VILLAGE OF ARTS & HUMANITIES

# Table of Contents

## 2 | Executive Summary

## 6 | Background: Understanding the Underpinnings of the Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative and What It Set Out to Accomplish

## 8 | Initiative Bedrocks: A Theory of Change for Literacy-Rich Environments and the Science of Early Learning and Literacy

## 10 | Building a Robust Team With Specialized Expertise and Strong Community Connections

## 16 | Theory of Change Evolves

- 18 Using an Asset-Based Approach: From Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods to Neighborhood-Rich Literacy
- 21 The Benefits of a Relationship-Based Literacy Initiative
- 23 Installations as Celebrations of Culture and Local History

## 24 | Approaches to Building and Sustaining Community Buy-In and Ownership

- 26 Implications for Sustainable Impact

## 27 | The Resulting Installations

- 28 Indochinese American Council
- 30 Mt. Airy CDC
- 32 Puentes de Salud
- 34 The Village of Arts and Humanities

## 36 | Impact of LRNI

## 39 | Initiative Challenges

- 39 COVID-19 Pandemic
- 40 Approach to Project Design
- 41 Sustaining Momentum in a Multi-Year Project
- 42 Implementing Installation Visions Within Construction Constraints

## 43 | Success Factors

- 43 Greater Flexibility
- 44 Additional Time and Funding

## 46 | Project Learning and Key Takeaways

## 50 | Recommendations

## 51 | Conclusion

## 52 | Acknowledgements

# Executive Summary

In 2020, the William Penn Foundation launched the **Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative (LRNI)** to turn neighborhood spaces into playful learning environments and expand literacy opportunities for young children and their families.

Drawing on emerging research on playful learning landscapes and promising pilot efforts, the initiative called for public installations across several Philadelphia neighborhoods, designed in collaboration with community organizations and stakeholders, to support early language and literacy development. Following four years of stakeholder persistence and collaboration, a dozen new installations with connections to the culture, people, and history of local neighborhoods are now supporting literacy and language development within everyday life across Philadelphia.

## The initiative **began with a theory of change—**

**“that by installing opportunities for engagement with literacy and learning (e.g., signage, playful learning installations, programming, etc.) in multiple sites throughout a community, the collective impact of these experiences may affect adult-child interactions in environments such as the home.”**

Specifically, it supported community-based organizations (CBOs) to engage community members to help design playful learning installations. The four participating CBOs used this initiative as a broader community-building opportunity oriented around embedding language and literacy development within the unique histories, places, and cultures of their neighborhoods. They saw playful learning installations as a way to promote language and literacy development for young children, and as a rallying point to affirm community pride, strengthen relationships, and support families.

Each of the four CBOs—[Indochinese American Council](#), [Mt. Airy CDC](#), [Puentes de Salud](#), and [The Village of Arts and Humanities](#)—expanded the scope of how the initial call conceptualized literacy to think about literacy beyond school readiness skills to include the families and communities who play an important role in supporting language and literacy development in young children. This expanded scope included storytelling, community history, multilingualism, and cultural traditions that help children and families see literacy as everyday encounters with places in the neighborhood. ***What emerged was not only a set of literacy-rich neighborhoods but a vision of “neighborhood-rich literacy.”***





Over the course of four years, the CBOs and their communities worked in close partnership with technical assistance providers, including designers, researchers, and evaluators. They created 12 installations across four communities that addressed key priorities and needs in their communities.

### ■ Indochinese American Council

Indochinese American Council focused on school-community partnerships, **bringing imaginative play into libraries and schoolyards.**

### ■ Mt. Airy CDC

Mt. Airy CDC wove storytelling into the natural and historical landscape with three outdoor installations to **encourage play and conversations across generations.**

### ■ Puentes de Salud

At Puentes de Salud, interactive murals and neighborhood maps, codices, and a game of *Lotería* invited families to **re-visit their cultural identity through languages and iconic art.**

### ■ The Village of Arts and Humanities

The Village of Arts and Humanities transformed the alphabet into a **neighborhood-wide recognition of people and places that hold the community's identity and pride.**



From design to implementation, community members of all ages became participants, collaborators, artists, advisors, builders, and stewards. Many of the installations embodied design elements that directly reflected the people, places, and histories of the community. While their completion was celebrated as project milestones, CBOs and community members emphasized that sustained programming and community ownership are essential to maintain the engagement and impact of these spaces.

The initiative overcame several internal and external challenges, including COVID-19 disruptions to expected modes of community engagement, limited collaboration among partners prior to

launching the project design processes, multiple leadership and staff transitions across CBOs and TA providers, and bureaucratic and engineering complexities with construction (e.g., permits, materials). Parent surveys conducted after the installations were complete showed increased frequency of language-rich conversations—like parents and children talking about past experiences and discussing daily plans. Parents also reported a stronger perception of their neighborhoods as places to support their children’s learning.

A few **important and affirming lessons emerged** from the persistent efforts by the CBOs, community stakeholders, and technical assistance providers:

### 1 Literacy resides in the community.

Families and neighborhoods brought rich literacy practices to the table, even before formal installations and programming began. Survey data confirmed that parents were already supporting literacy through frequent storytelling, pretend reading, and cultural conversations. The installations **helped to affirm and promote what was already happening.**

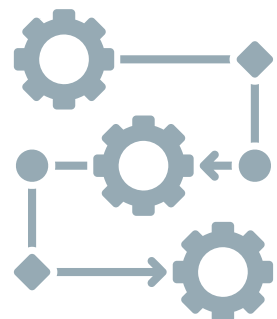


### Community engagement is a **process and an outcome.** 2

Community engagement was not just a way to gather input or buy-in; it was the **primary mechanism for creating lasting impact.** The joint design process required and strengthened trust, relationships, and collaboration.

### 3 **Adaptation and flexibility** are critical for building community ownership and buy in.

The initiative grew stronger when the key stakeholders (funder, CBOs, and TA providers) **created space and allowed time for deliberation, experimentation, and modification.** CBOs especially stayed faithful to their own and their communities’ values and principles, even as they navigated the growing pains of the project, staff turnover, and external challenges—ranging from a pandemic to building permits.





## What might these lessons mean for future endeavors that aim to promote positive changes with community-based organizations?

### FOR FUNDERS

Engage partners early in the design process of an initiative and intentionally build flexibility into funding, allowing time for planning and relationship-building during implementation. Commitment to certain objectives or deliverables can work in tandem with a community engagement process. Funders can provide guidance with a clear framework and goals, while also offering flexible resources that allow grantees the time and space to adapt and evolve as they learn with their communities.

### FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PARTNERS

Bring expertise and an authentic “not knowing” humility to partnerships and work collaboratively to set learning goals. Effective TA partners recognize that local context and relationships are critical project drivers. Building trust and mutual respect with community-based organizations enables TA providers to share their outside expertise, not as prescriptions but as welcomed affirmations and support for local action.

### FOR COMMUNITY- BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Losing staff who have worked closely with the community to inform design, make decisions about implementation, and actively contribute to programming can threaten those relationships and the impact of the work. While staff turnover is inevitable, engaging several people in the project when possible can reduce the impact of staff turnover and provide greater continuity for the community.

### FOR EVALUATORS

Work closely with the community to understand and define collective learning goals and ways to measure them. Evaluators of community-based projects may be required to adjust pre-conceived definitions of success to be relevant to the specific community. However, this does not imply that evaluators and researchers should sacrifice evidence-based best practices and validated measures. Instead, evaluation and research activities can be responsive to community needs while remaining committed to and adhering to the principles of established research.

At its core, LRNI demonstrated that **a strong foundation for early language and literacy development exists in communities and can continue to grow from within**. The outcome of this initiative is not just the visible murals, games, and installations, but an essential set of beliefs and relationships within neighborhoods committed to nurturing young children and families.

# Background:

## Understanding the Underpinnings of the Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative and What It Set Out to Accomplish

The Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative was created by the William Penn Foundation (the foundation) as part of its Literacy-Rich Environments strategy.

This strategy aimed to enable children in Philadelphia to learn to read proficiently by the end of third grade by providing opportunities for adult-child interactions in literacy-rich environments outside the classroom.



Specifically, the Literacy-Rich Environments strategy's theory of change strived for "**all children in Philadelphia to live in literacy-rich environments.**"

**Literacy-rich environments** are defined as ones that have physical installations (e.g., signage, murals) and programming that help spark verbal interactions between children and adults. Research shows that these verbal interactions build literacy and language skills for children ages 0 to 8.

Indeed, the foundation's investments in various literacy and playful learning installation projects in Philadelphia had shown promising results. For example, an installation at a local bus stop called Urban Thinkscape resulted in more parent-child interactions and child language use than what occurred in a traditional playground in the same neighborhood. Research also showed that when families and communities were involved in the program design, the programs were more likely to support children's early learning.

In conceiving of LRNI, the foundation aimed to bring multiple promising practices simultaneously to specific neighborhoods—purposefully engaging the entire community, including families, to weigh in on how to create a "literacy-rich neighborhood" in a way that was authentic to them.



## LRNI was launched in early 2020 with **four goals**:



### Create multiple opportunities in a specific geography for families with young children

to interact with reading resources, playful learning installations, programming, and signage and prompts for adult-child conversation and interaction. Families should encounter multiple touchpoints while conducting their everyday activities throughout the neighborhood.



### Engage the community in the development and implementation

of the literacy-rich neighborhood resources, installations, and programming, to build ownership among neighborhood leaders, community members, and organizations.



### Identify best practices for creating literacy-rich neighborhoods

that can be scaled and replicated in other Philadelphia neighborhoods and cities across the country.



### Build a network among the pilot neighborhoods

to foster peer learning, collaboration, and resource sharing.



# Initiative Bedrocks:

## A Theory of Change for Literacy-Rich Environments and the Science of Early Learning and Literacy

As the initial request for proposals for LRNI made clear, *literacy skills do not result solely from school-based academic instruction.*

Integral to the William Penn Foundation's theory of change for Literacy-Rich Environments are the strategies to create *"opportunities to embed or strengthen literacy programming outside of school where children spend 80 percent of their time."*<sup>1</sup>

Neighborhood and community learning spaces—both the final installations and the processes by which the installations are conceived and implemented—not only hold promise to improve school-based literacy outcomes but also promote family interactions, civic engagement, and neighborhood vibrancy.<sup>2</sup>



The **Brookings Playful Learning Landscapes metrics framework** outlines a way of understanding the potential impact of early literacy efforts on future school-age reading assessments. Playful Learning Landscapes reimagines everyday spaces for children and families in ways that spark educational and social interactions and support children's development. Infusing public spaces with playful learning opportunities for children and families creates vibrant and inclusive social environments that nurture a strong sense of community and improve educational equity, preparing children to thrive in the future.

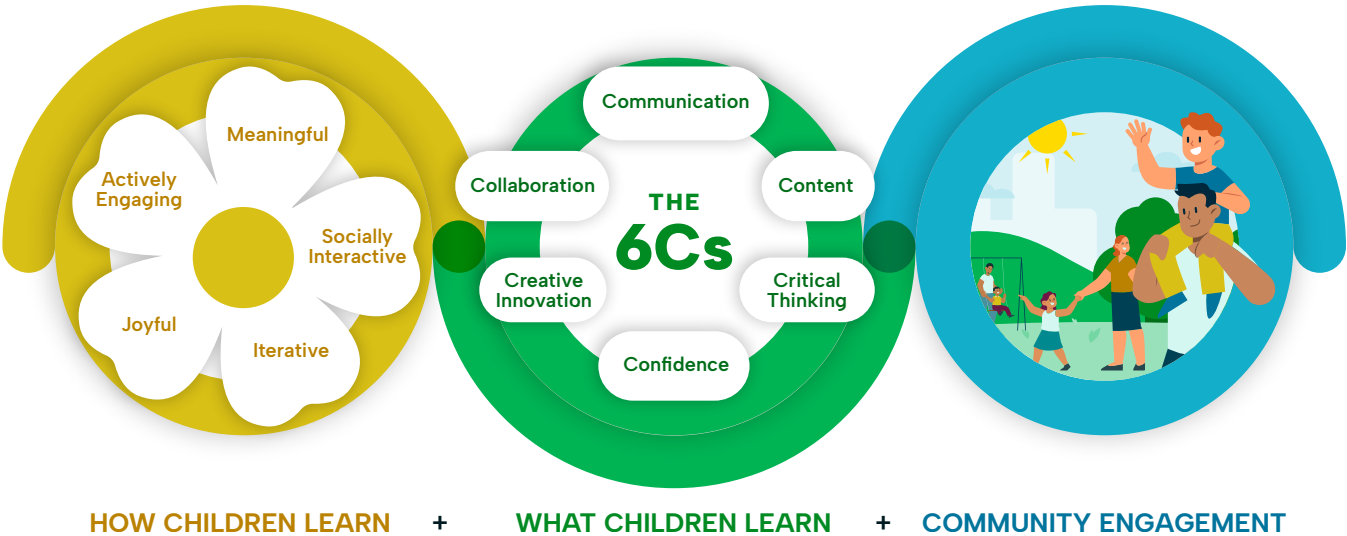
Playful Learning Landscapes is based on a model of community engagement and co-design that centers a community's unique culture to create playful learning moments that are based on the latest science of child development and appeal to an intergenerational audience. Playful Learning Landscapes installations are designed around the science of *how* and *what* children need to learn to thrive in the future.

1. William Penn Foundation Literacy-Rich Environments Theory of Change: [https://williampennfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/GL\\_LiteracyRichEnv-ToC.pdf](https://williampennfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/GL_LiteracyRichEnv-ToC.pdf)

2. Playful Learning Landscapes metrics framework: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Playful-Learning-Landscapes-metrics-framework\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Playful-Learning-Landscapes-metrics-framework_FINAL.pdf)



FIGURE 1: PLAYFUL LEARNING LANDSCAPES DESIGN FORMULA



The skills, relational, and communal dimensions of literacy are fittingly summarized by the powerful metaphor of “**mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors**” which originated from multicultural children’s literature.<sup>3</sup>

A neighborhood rich in language and literacy **provides** children with many ways to see themselves and their families reflected in literacy activities; **engages** them to see through their immediate surroundings to a larger world across time, space, and imagination; and **invites** them to engage and participate in their communities.

This understanding emerged through community engagements and the collaboration between CBOs and TA providers and gradually became embedded in where, why, and what was included in the installation designs and the associated programming.

3. Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi.



# Building a Robust Team With Specialized Expertise and Strong Community Connections

The William Penn Foundation selected **four Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)** with extended history in Philadelphia neighborhoods and meeting many of the attributes the foundation prioritized, such as:



Deep knowledge of and strong **connections with the community**



Experience in **supporting children and families**



A record of **collaborating with other entities**

All of these operate in neighborhoods where there have been limited places and spaces for children and families to engage in literacy.



*Mt. Airy CDC*



*Puentes de Salud*

*Indochinese American Council*



*The Village of Arts and Humanities*







## ■ Indochinese American Council

Established in 1982, the **Indochinese American Council (IAC)** acts as a vital service provider and essential community cornerstone for residents of North Philadelphia's Logan and Olney neighborhoods. Through its core mission of "helping disadvantaged, multiracial, minorities, immigrants, and refugees from all parts of the world to achieve social mobility through education, traditional art and personal interaction," IAC is committed to empowering residents in attaining social, economic, and educational advancement through culturally sensitive, high-quality services developed and implemented in synergy with community stakeholders.

IAC is a lifeline to the communities it serves—a diverse assemblage of residents, including individuals from Vietnam, Korea, Africa, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The organization's current operational framework includes educational programming: after-school and summer camp initiatives for children ages five to 13; family literacy programs; and adult education sessions, including courses in ESL, civics, and technology.

The organization also partners with local groups and residents in providing holistic health education, mental health services, and support for individuals seeking a pathway to citizenship. The organization's diverse staff, many of whom are immigrants and refugees, enable it to effectively address the linguistic and cultural needs of community members.







## ■ Mt. Airy CDC

**Mt. Airy CDC** is a cornerstone for the historic Germantown and Mt. Airy communities. Established in 1980, the organization began as a collaborative effort between the East and West sides of Mt. Airy with the goal of countering the effects of disinvestment and neglect afflicting Germantown Avenue, the community's principal business corridor.

The partnership initially focused on acquisition and rehabilitation of neglected commercial storefronts along the corridor, transforming them into income-producing and locally owned and operated properties. Over the years, Mt. Airy CDC has evolved to encompass a diverse array of community services, including counseling for first-time homeowners, public programming and community events, business development, and infrastructure projects motivated by historic restoration and preservation—all which are geared toward the organization's mission of "preserving, empowering, and advancing a vibrant and diverse Mt. Airy."

In recent years, the organization has undertaken a literacy focused-programming initiative targeted in a small neighborhood in the 19144 ZIP code section of Philadelphia. With ongoing efforts to enhance educational opportunities and foster literacy across generations, Mt. Airy CDC leveraged partnerships with local stakeholders, including the Pomona Cherokee Civic Council, to facilitate the implementation of free outdoor summer reading camps.







## ■ Puentes de Salud

**Puentes de Salud** focuses on promoting the health and well-being of the Latine community in greater Philadelphia through top-tier bilingual and bicultural medical services, innovative educational and culturally relevant art programs, and community development initiatives. Founded on principles of social determinants of health and social justice, the organization champions collaborative efforts across disciplines in addressing the conditions influencing individual quality of life and community development.

Puentes de Salud not only provides immediate services but also challenges social inequalities and injustices to improve community and individual health and well-being. The organization partners with various stakeholders—including community members, schools, universities, government institutions, and nonprofit organizations—to tackle adverse structural, economic, and social challenges experienced by Latine residents in greater Philadelphia. By addressing social determinants of health, social justice, and structural violence, Puentes de Salud emphasizes integrated medical and social services to support mental, emotional, and physical well-being at both individual and community levels.

Puentes de Salud's mission encompasses two main objectives: 1) addressing immediate health, education, arts and culture, and social service needs within the Latine immigrant community, and 2) creating a nurturing learning environment for future advocates, educators, and health professionals to explore the impact of social determinants of health and social injustices.







## ■ Village of Arts and Humanities

The **Village of Arts and Humanities** (The Village) is a long-standing arts and community revitalization organization supporting artists and community residents in Philadelphia's Fairhill-Hartranft neighborhood. With a mission to foster a more just and equitable society, the organization values art as a powerful tool for societal transformation, emphasizing creativity in thinking, methodology, and implementation.

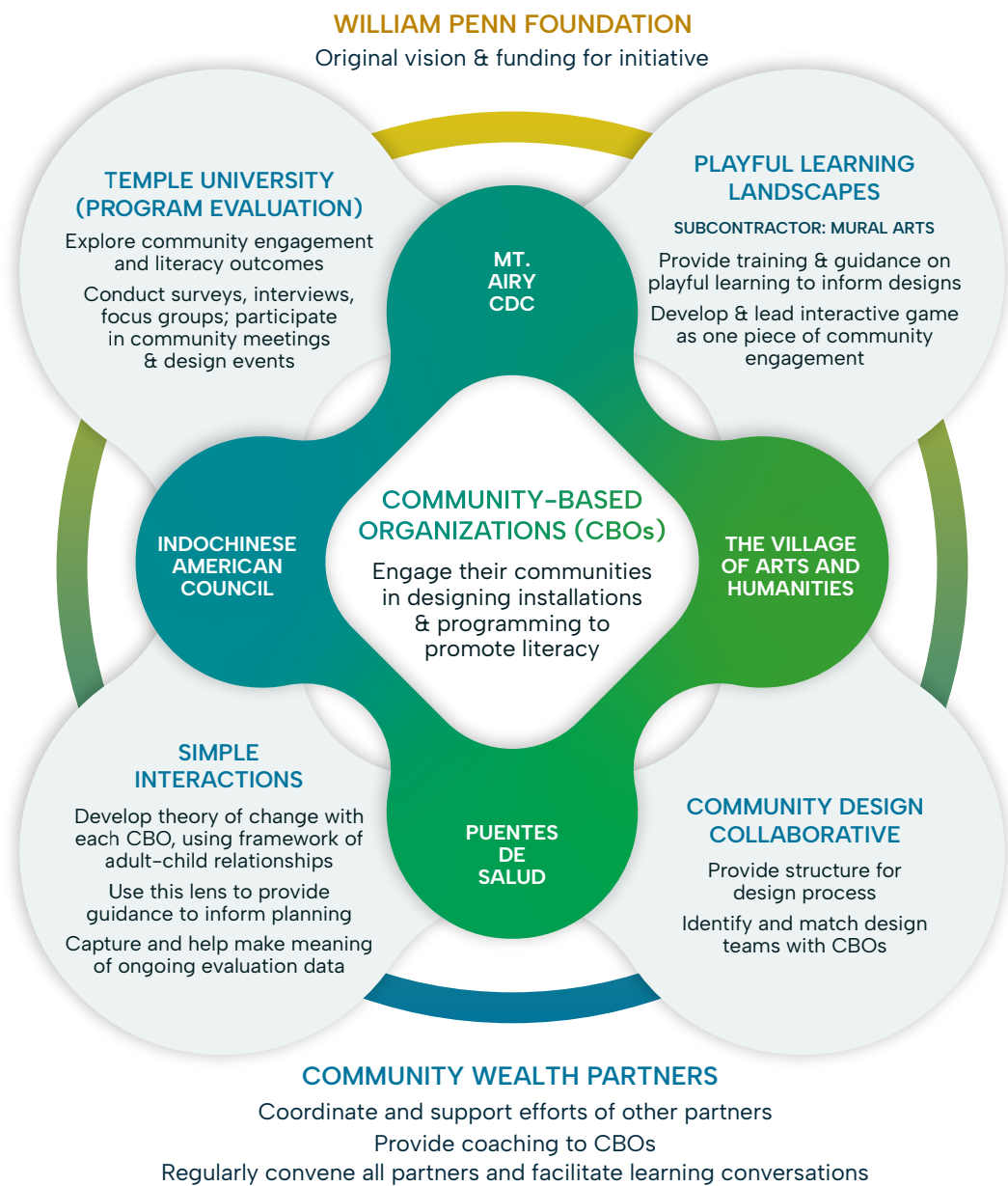
Established more than 30 years ago and embodying values of trust, consistency, and boldness, The Village's creative campus serves as a network of art parks, gardens, and buildings across urban land, with programs evolving to meet community needs. Their core programs focus on art, education, and social justice, aiming to amplify community creativity, build bridges across demographics, challenge unjust systems, activate passion, enhance skills, and promote civic engagement.

As a trusted community anchor, The Village engages in creative placemaking efforts to improve community well-being, reduce violence, support returning citizens, and cultivate community wealth. By creating engaging art installations, promoting literacy-rich environments, and fostering community collaboration, The Village of Arts and Humanities strives to create a vibrant, inclusive, and thriving neighborhood in Fairhill-Hartranft.



In addition, the foundation recruited TA providers with combined expertise in playful learning installation designs, community engagement, early learning, and research and evaluation in early childhood and community work to support CBOs’ efforts in designing and building playful learning installations with their communities. The TA providers included the Community Design Collaborative, Simple Interactions, Temple University, Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL), Mural Arts Philadelphia, and Community Wealth Partners (see Literacy–Rich Neighborhoods Initiative Partner Overview below for a description of the partners’ roles in the initiative).

FIGURE 2: LITERACY-RICH NEIGHBORHOODS INITIATIVE PARTNER OVERVIEW



# Theory of Change Evolves

## LRNI began with a straightforward theory of change:

By embedding *literacy-rich opportunities* (e.g., installations, programming, signage) across multiple sites within neighborhoods, young children and families would engage with expanded literacy opportunities, leading to improved early language development and literacy outcomes. The eponymous term **“Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods”** befits this intent.

As the initiative started, the CBOs developed their approaches around the concrete objective of playful learning installations and expanded the implementation to align with their own traditions of community-led and grassroots engagement and their own understandings of what families needed and brought to early literacy. CBOs and their community partners shared that while physical installations would provide concrete anchors in the community, literacy could be woven into the social, cultural, and historical fabric of each neighborhood. As partners and community members explored how “literacy” would materialize for their unique contexts, it became clear that early literacy involved both traditional pre-reading skills and storytelling and story-sharing experiences integral to human connections and community engagement.

The varied conceptualizations of early literacy became a source of much discussion to identify differences and build consensus among all stakeholders of the initiative (CBOs, community members, designers, researchers, and funder). This became an early example of a shift to greater flexibility in project implementation. Because the initiative falls within the foundation’s larger “Strong Start, Strong Readers” strategy targeting third-grade reading proficiency and the CBOs’ familiarity with other literacy-focused projects, some stakeholders came with a focus on literacy skills based on academic achievements (e.g., building vocabulary, increasing adult-child conversations and interactions). Other stakeholders advocated to expand the definition of early literacy to include community and cultural components (literacy through storytelling in families and neighborhoods).





To bring these rich perspectives of literacy together, participants met twice, facilitated jointly by representatives from Simple Interactions and Puentes de Salud, to share and discuss how these different approaches may weave together in installations and programming.

These “**Defining Literacy**” conversations were an important inflection point where a broadened understanding of literacy led to more community-responsive (or place-based) project goals and processes. In this approach, community engagement is not merely a means to come up with acceptable design ideas but is seen as an instrumental part of how the initiative might make a sustainable impact on literacy and the well-being of the community.

This pivot enabled each CBO and their respective communities to engage in the project in a way that was meaningful and relevant to them, which is key to ensuring community ownership. Specifically:

### ■ **Connection to Local Stories and History**

For Mt. Airy CDC in the Germantown and Mt. Airy neighborhoods, literacy is about stories and storytellers—both historical and present—that are tied to the people, peoples, and natural environments within the neighborhood.

### ■ **Cultural Relevance and Inclusivity**

For Puentes de Salud’s work with Latine immigrant families, literacy promotes parental confidence and pride in cultural, multilingual heritages and installations are spaces where Spanish and indigenous languages are celebrated. Puentes de Salud’s work invites families to recognize and use their multilingual and multicultural knowledge and abilities as strengths and assets, and as relevant to their children’s lives.

### ■ **Engagement by Connections and Partnerships**

The Indochinese American Council’s work in the Logan and Olney neighborhoods highlighted literacy as a tool for intergenerational connections and school-community partnerships.

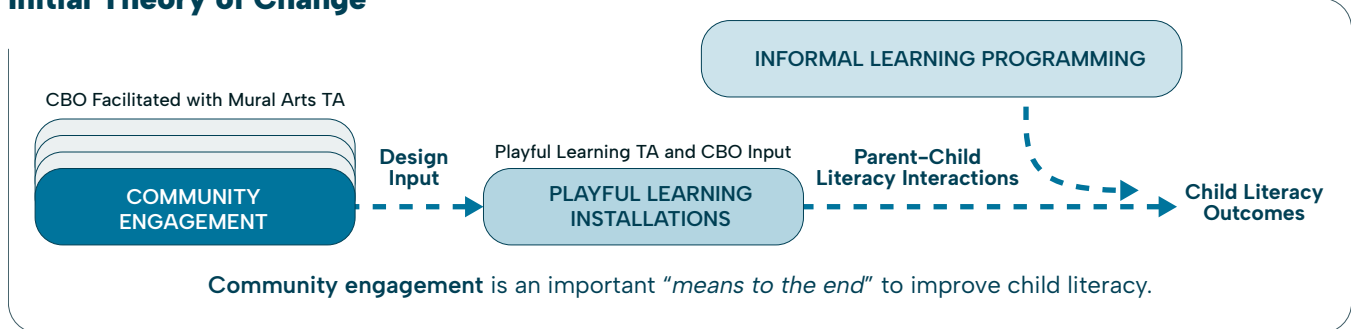
### ■ **Build Trust, Accountability, and Ownership with Community**

In Fairhill-Hartranft, The Village of Arts and Humanities fostered literacy through public art and creative placemaking, not merely with community input, but ownership. Here, literacy meant empowering intergenerational community members to identify strengths and challenges in the community and having the resources and autonomy to use literacy to address the most urgent problems.

FIGURE 3: EVOLUTION OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE

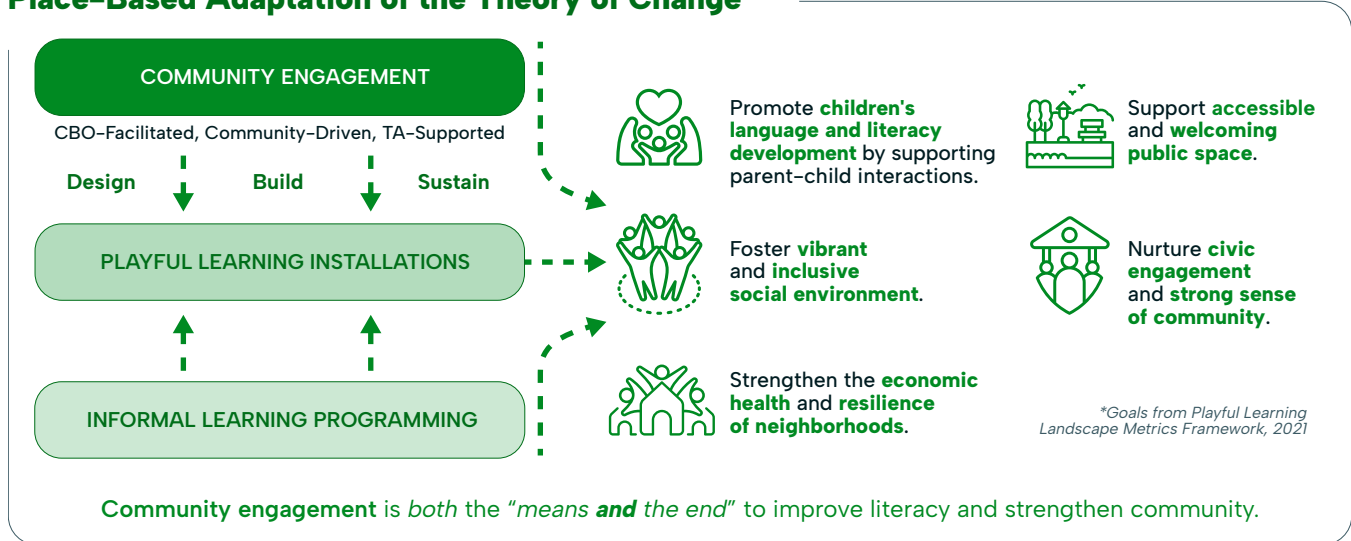
## Initial Theory of Change

THEORY OF CHANGE 1.0



## Place-Based Adaptation of the Theory of Change

THEORY OF CHANGE 2.0



## Using an Asset-Based Approach: From Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods to Neighborhood-Rich Literacy

As a place-based initiative, the critical task of the CBOs was to fully develop the initial theory of change of the initiative within the unique context, needs, and assets of their communities. The “Defining Literacy” meetings led to a gradual evolution from talking about “literacy-rich neighborhoods” (putting new installations into neighborhood places and spaces for families to engage in literacy) to an aspirational imagining of “neighborhood-rich literacy”—where the installation designs would reflect the rich assets of community relationships, stories, spaces, and institutions.

From the early phases of the project, CBOs and community members were clear that they wanted the LRNI project to reflect and communicate the assets, skills, and identities of their community and neighborhoods. Additionally, each CBO sought to counter the prevailing deficit framing with which their neighborhoods were portrayed in the news media and societal expectations. As a staff member from one CBO shared, “One of the main challenges that we see and experience is that there is a pervasive assumption that kids and families in the communities we serve are lacking in literacy, in their development of literacy skills, and that parents aren’t necessarily well equipped to be helping their children progress in developing literacy skills. Our experience is, that way of thinking really does a disservice to the communities that we serve. Because that doesn’t take into account the multilingual literacies practiced by these communities, the different cultural contexts, ways that people interact around speech and language in these communities.”

The asset-based framing of community literacy emerged through the interviews with CBO staff and community focus groups and was elaborated through the aforementioned “Defining Literacy” meetings. Each CBO conceptualized literacy broadly, summarized by one CBO as the way that people “make meaning in the world” or communicate in ways that draw on the full range and ways of knowing.

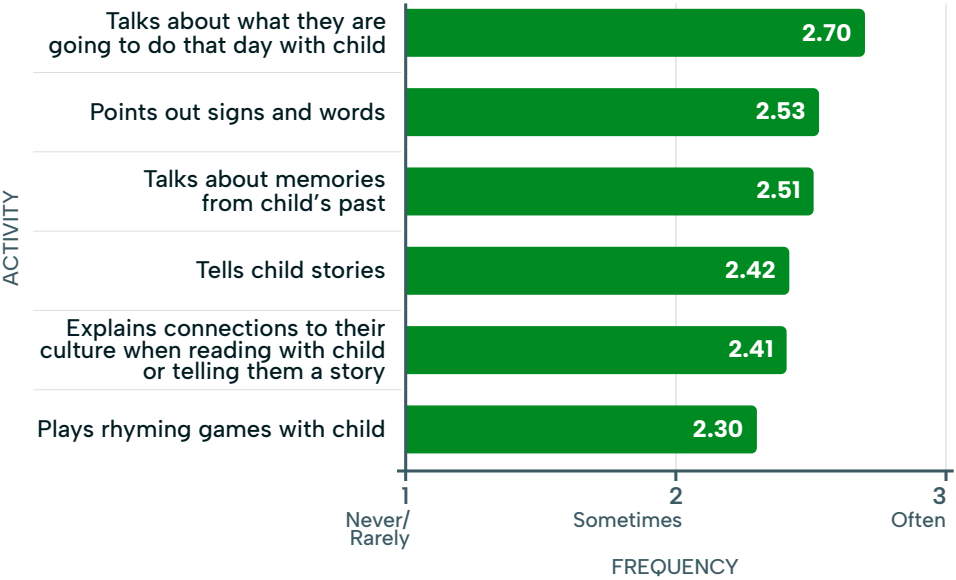
The stronger alignment with the asset-based framing that Philadelphia neighborhoods are already rich in literacy is bolstered by information shared by parents in a pre-installation survey.



Parents frequently engage their children in activities that promote literacy, language, and culture.

- Parents **engage in most activities sometimes** (i.e., once in a while or weekly) **or often** (i.e., daily or several times per day)
- Parents **most commonly talk with their child about:**
  - what they are going to do that day
  - point out signs and words
  - talk about memories from the child’s past

FIGURE 4A: FREQUENCY OF PARENT’S ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILD’S LEARNING BEFORE LRNI







**Across a broad range of literacy-related activities, children display high levels of engagement in learning about literacy and language.**

- Children engage in most learning activities **weekly** or **daily** on average
- Children most commonly **draw**, **sing simple songs**, and **read books** or **pretend to read the story in a book**

**3.7/4**

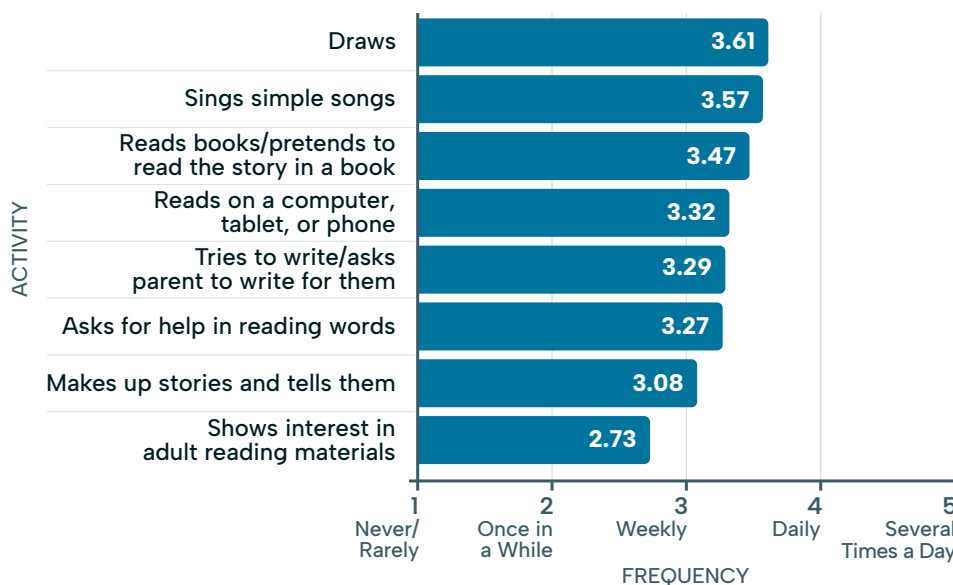


Parents place a high level of importance on their children **learning about family, culture, and community**, with an average level of importance of **3.7 out of 4**.

Parents draw on a **variety of sources of support** to promote their children's learning.

- Most commonly, parents rely on **help from school or childcare (73.8%)** and **family and friends (66.2%)**.
- Substantial numbers also rely on **neighborhood or community resources (54.8%)** to support their child's learning.

**FIGURE 4B: FREQUENCY OF CHILD'S ENGAGEMENT IN LITERACY & LANGUAGE LEARNING BEFORE LRNI**



Further, each CBO aspired to use the LRNI project as a way to re-envision literacy as a community effort that connects families and neighborhood resources. To build these communities, the CBOs discussed how they plan to leverage the assets and opportunities that already exist in their neighborhood by looking to community leaders and residents to guide the development of the LRNI project and to build networks and communities around the concept of literacy. Many CBOs and community leaders commented that their neighborhoods have under-resourced schools that are limited in their capacity to adequately address the literacy needs of their students. In addition, they observed that parents and caregivers, while deeply involved in their children's lives, are stretched thin and may lack confidence in becoming more involved in their children's literacy development.

Each CBO communicated that there is a need for new approaches to thinking about and building literacy in communities. One CBO described their initiative as “informing, empowering, creating opportunities for parents to see that they can be an integral part of their children’s literacy development. There are moments in time throughout their days that they can have these moments with their children. They don’t necessarily have to fully open up their children’s homework and fully understand what the teachers want them to do. But they can develop literacy habits with their children through their everyday interactions and movements throughout the community. And to give them that sense of confidence and empowerment.”

Common goals across all four CBOs included making literacy-building an intergenerational and everyday activity and developing literacy materials that reflect and celebrate who the community is, where they live, and where their families have come from.

## The Benefits of a Relationship-Based Literacy Initiative

The “neighborhood-rich literacy” theory of change rests on the foundation of reciprocal and consistent human relationships between CBOs and their neighborhoods. Unlike conventional literacy interventions, which might rely on material resources or stand-alone programming, the notion of “neighborhood-rich literacy” is sustained by investing in people who trust each other and share faith in the initiative. Although taking this approach required significant effort and was not always smooth going, a relationship-based literacy initiative has great potential in fostering community ownership and deeper engagement. As each CBO and its staff become more deeply embedded in the social and cultural life of the neighborhoods, they are uniquely positioned to:

### ■ Understand Evolving Community Needs

Staff who know community members personally and over time have a deep understanding of community needs, which informs design and implementation. For example, the staff at Puentes de Salud had a profound understanding of both the need and hesitancy of immigrant parents to connect their children with the linguistic and cultural heritages of their home countries. Since inception, Puentes programming has been developed on community voices. Community members were included in every aspect of this project and worked alongside staff members, who come from the community and have longstanding relationships within the cultures the organization serves.



## ■ Extend History of Support

Indochinese American Council used their long relationship with residents in the community to extend support in new ways. Their decades of multigenerational literacy activities within the community brought a strong foundation to extending support to young children and families. Community members and past IAC partners reached out within their own circles and made new introductions for IAC in the context of this project. These connections created additional opportunities and increased the resources and knowledge that the organization was able to leverage for this project.

## ■ Cultivate Community Ownership

Mt. Airy CDC's reading camps thrived when community members helped to lead the programming along with longtime staff. The programming cannot be separated from neighborhood spaces as a shared community asset.

## ■ Sustain Trust

Trusting relationships allow for open dialogue about community aspirations and challenges. The Village was committed from the start to earn and maintain the trust of community stakeholders wary of outside "savior" initiatives that come and go in the neighborhood. Throughout the course of the project, it sustained a connected group of "professional learning community" stakeholders that represented community elders, businesses, and public institutions.

As CBO staff members extended and built trust with the neighborhoods, they became the continuity of the project and of partnerships between CBOs and neighborhoods. These long-term relationships enabled the CBOs and their neighbors to define literacy as a deeper and more meaningful connection to people, places, and stories.





## Installations as Celebrations of Culture and Local History

In the new theory of change, physical installations symbolize the deeper relationships and connections that LRNI sought to foster. CBOs reimagined installations as the physical embodiment of their neighborhood's unique cultural assets, community resilience, and shared experiences. For example:

### ■ The Village designed two I-Spy style murals

that included features and references to neighborhood activities, as well as current and historic places in the neighborhood, such as the former Good & Plenty factory, movie theater, and roller-skating rink. These ideas were inspired through community engagement activities held at local schools, as well as other conversations with community members.

### ■ The waiting room at Puentes de Salud's wellness center was turned into a cultural hub,

offering art, play, craft, reading, and audiovisual interactive components as multilingual resources that connected with families' immigrant identities and experiences, reflecting a commitment to "literacy through community" rather than "learning about (English) literacy" alone.



Through this envisioning and experimentation, CBOs wanted installations to play a dual role—to be **tools to help children develop language and literacy skills**, and to be a **reflection of the community's history and culture**.

At their best, the installations are just the *starting points* where residents could see *their own* culture, languages, history, and stories reflected.

# Approaches to Building and Sustaining Community Buy-In and Ownership

Core to the LRNI project was **involving community members** in the development of the installations.

CBOs had strong and deep ties to their respective communities, and they were able to draw on these connections to engage people in their projects. Each CBO decided how they wanted to involve community, and each used a variety of approaches during the project, including:



Creating an **advisory board** of community members to provide input on the project direction



Holding **focus groups, one-on-one conversations**, and regular **community meetings** to get input on the project



Using a **board game designed by Mural Arts** to generate community input on learning goals and locations for the installations



**Co-facilitating the Drexel University course, Civic Engagement & Community Design in Logan** (Summer 2022) on architectural design with community members to propose designs



**Running surveys and hosting charettes** with community members to provide input for—and get feedback on—designs



Having **community days** where community members were able to help build or paint installations





While all CBOs were deeply invested in involving their communities, several organizations indicated that the importance of co-creation with the community became more evident over the four years of the project. One CBO shared that co-creation was critical to getting community buy-in: “We started off with us as the project management team, creating the ideas and then presenting them to them, and kind of getting a vote versus what we learned later is that we built with them to create the ideas with them, and then got the buy-in and the vote. And we learned that inviting them to be a part of that process of building the ideas, building the selections, created better buy-in in comparison to how we initially started.”

Even though approaches to involving community were fruitful, they were not always smooth going and required adaptability and transparency. While all four CBOs reported that they successfully engaged community members in their projects, one person shared, “The language of community engagement misses a lot of the nuance it takes to connect and, even with the best intentions, to navigate the complexities.” The timing of the launch of the project in 2020, during the height of the pandemic, the long duration of the project, and the need to balance community perspectives with logistical, financial, and design constraints posed challenges to community engagement. While some CBOs commented that it was wonderful to have the project pulling people together during the social isolation of the pandemic, it was hard to keep people engaged over multiple years. Another CBO noted that the biggest challenge was explaining to community members when they could not implement their ideas due to outside limitations. The CBO did not want to let their community members down or have them feel that their input and perspectives were not important to the project. They felt that clear, ongoing communication was key to overcoming this challenge.





## Implications for Sustainable Impact

The shift to a more comprehensive, community-centered theory of change has practical implications for sustaining literacy initiatives. The CBOs envisioned that by building literacy on the foundation of neighborhood “richness,” the installations and the activities might achieve community-led sustainability. When literacy initiatives are deeply connected to a neighborhood’s people, stories, and shared resources, they are more likely to be valued, maintained, and expanded by the communities themselves. Community members and institutions (e.g., schools, historical sites, businesses) can become stakeholders in literacy, participating actively in the co-creation of literacy-rich spaces that resonate with their lives and neighborhood aspirations.

The process of turning the LRNI theory of change into a community-embedded reality reflected the shared conviction across the CBOs that literacy development is inseparable from a community’s social fabric. This shift to “neighborhood-rich literacy” expanded the concept of literacy itself as something that grows organically from the unique needs, assets, and strengths of each neighborhood. On the other hand, this shift places a greater demand on ongoing community and CBO support to sustain the impact. This new conception of change required continuous engagement between CBOs and their communities in relation to the physical installations.





## The Resulting Installations

Under this evolved theory of change, each CBO developed installations inspired by playful learning that *reflected their communities' unique characteristics and understanding of literacy.*



# Indochinese American Council



**Indochinese American Council** supports a multicultural community in the Logan neighborhood of Philadelphia. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Logan was known to be home to a large Southeast Asian population, but it has since become a transitional neighborhood for African and South American refugees, who often settle in Logan once they arrive in Philadelphia and end up moving away from Logan once they find their footing in the city. In this initiative, IAC wanted to offer a broader set of opportunities to its community, so the organization partnered with Drexel University to offer a design course that brought together community members and Drexel students. The first of IAC's LRNI installations was designed during this course, and IAC used community feedback from the course to inform their designs.

## Logan Library Tree

IAC's first installation, the **Logan Library Tree**, brings nature to the city and sparks children's imagination through playful learning. The sinuous tree trunk features etched native animal designs for children to discover, while the interior houses a vibrant bookshelf and reading area. This installation was designed to draw children and families to their local library, providing literacy-rich experiences alongside imaginative play. Positioned at the center of the children's section, the life-sized tree's bark includes hidden animal figures for children to seek and find, encouraging observation and storytelling. Inside, the installation features whiteboards, magnetic boards, and accessible shelves filled with children's books that invite visitors to read in a cozy, welcoming space. Additionally, this design incorporates numerous opportunities for language interaction, with prompts throughout the installation to encourage literacy activities such as letter recognition, phonics, spelling, and storytelling.





## Logan Nook of Discovery

In collaboration with Jay Cooke Elementary school, IAC also created the **Logan Nook of Discovery**, an outdoor play area that provides students and neighborhood residents with a space for exploration and discovery. The Cooke site consists of three semi-distinct zones: the reading area at the far end, the central area featuring active play components and a chalkboard, and the hilltop area with additional active play elements with prompts for the students to follow and challenge themselves. Given this layout, the playful learning goals extend from the entire outdoor play area, allowing students to engage in a myriad of high-quality learning opportunities that fit around the Serengeti theme. The active play area features an archeological sandbox and large animal and bird cutouts. Interactive signage in the play area encourages activities such as measuring, basic math, jumping, running, language practice, and games. The space combines opportunities for active play with areas designed for rest and relaxation, complemented by native plants and a Little Free Library, allowing visitors to enjoy nature while learning.





# Mt. Airy CDC

Mt. Airy CDC focused their activities on providing innovative reading installations, literacy programming, interactive story-sharing, Little Free Library access, and interpretive signage to promote adult-child dialogue and literacy skill-building using popular pathways and featuring the rich local history of the Germantown and adjacent Mt. Airy neighborhoods. Located within walking distance of one another, these three unique installations reflect the family-friendly, nature-oriented, and historical character of this community.



## The Nest

The first installation, **The Nest**, provides a safe, welcoming, and nurturing space for sharing stories, reading aloud, engaging in wordplay and creative storytelling, and fostering multimodal, literacy-rich conversations. Located on the historic grounds of Cliveden, this special site serves as a year-round destination for the community, including special support for the Community Summer Reading Camp at Holman Field and broader community engagement through Cliveden's literacy programming. The custom wooden structure of The Nest is designed to look like a bird's nest found in nature. Integrated into this welcoming outdoor structure is a Little Free Library, multiple seating options, colorful wildlife I-Spy elements, story starters, and an interactive audio story station. Situated amid landscaped grounds of Cliveden, The Nest stimulates children's imaginations and creativity. The natural and historic environment of The Nest connects children with fun, meaningful, and relatable neighborhood stories that also generate curiosity, vocabulary, critical thinking, observational skills, and expanded empathy for others.





## The Hive

The second installation of the series, **The Hive**, is located at the Johnson House, which is rooted in local African American heritage, with a focus on the history of the sanctuary spaces on the Underground Railroad. The Hive design creates a safe haven for children to engage in literacy-rich playful learning and continues the nature themes of Cliveden. It includes multiple opportunities for children and caregivers to share stories with storytelling wheels, reading nooks, and word searching on custom word panels, which feature words that were chosen by the community and relate to the historic site. An I-Spy handheld viewer encourages children to make connections between the surrounding physical landscape and their inner landscape of emotions and feelings. An interactive audio station plays multiple songs for sing-alongs about justice, freedom, and joy.



## Seeds & Bees

The third installation of the series, **Seeds & Bees**, is located in the historic and nature-oriented landscape at the Wyck House. This site is designated a National Historic Landmark because of its lovely home, gardens, and farm that served as the residence for nine generations of a noteworthy Philadelphia family. The design of the Seeds & Bees installation was inspired by the many Wyck beehives and honey-producing bees that symbolize strength, harmony, and community.

This highly engaging literacy installation hosts hundreds of visitors each year to learn and share stories about this remarkable site and the surrounding neighborhood. The features include an interactive alphabet spinner for matching local food and recipes, a custom-designed nature collection table for exploring stories about the trees around them, and a weather station with an integrated weather forecaster for visitors to explore stories about local climate both past and future. Handheld I-Spy viewers guide children to identify and then read about trees surrounding the installation. There is a Little Free Library with books about local subjects and a letter jumble wordsearch wall for finding hidden words about local food, nature, and culture.





# Puentes de Salud

**Puentes de Salud** is a community-based public health organization founded two decades ago to serve the Latine community in Southeast Philadelphia. As the patterns of migration and settlement changed over time, the families who came to the clinic became more culturally and ethnically diverse and geographically spread out across the city. Their Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative project was designed to bring families into the clinic with installations that reflect their multicultural and multilingual heritage and help families feel confident to go outside the clinic to sites that welcomed and affirmed their children and families' immigrant identities.



## El Proyecto Grandote

The project, **El Proyecto Grandote** (The Big Project) focuses on promoting children's literacy through cultural knowledge and traditions. Together with the community, Puentes de Salud identified traditions and cultural practices that are meaningful to the community, like weaving, natural dyeing, agriculture, pottery, cooking, regional dancing, and embroidery, along with important cultural symbols, like corn and ancient codices. These elements are incorporated into each of the three elements of El Proyecto Grandote to promote cultural literacy, storytelling, and connection to the broader community.

### CULTURAL MURALS

The first component of this project is the installation of **cultural murals** at Puentes de Salud. These murals are a dynamic and engaging way to connect the community with Latin American history, culture, and traditions. Inside the foyer of Puentes de Salud, three interactive murals wrap around the waiting area. Led by the Puentes Arts and Culture Director, Nora Litz, a team of local Latine artists and community members created murals depicting points in time in the history of Latin American culture. The visual stories that the murals represent start with the domestication of maize that sustained and created the Mesoamerican civilization, culture, and traditions. They feature ancestral traditions and knowledge such as agriculture, weaving, medicinal plants, astronomy, music, and pottery. Added to this mural there is a wampum, made from white and purple shell beads from the Lenape tribe, whose land



Puentes de Salud sits on and includes water imagery connecting to the Caribbean. The murals also showcase a vibrant “fiesta,” bringing together people from all over the Caribbean and Latin America. Beneath the mural, at floor level, cubbies contain objects featured in the mural as a way for children to learn about cultural symbols like baskets and weaving. Some of the cubbies also contain audio components that allow children to hear spoken words in ancestral languages.

### ■ LOTERÍA

The project also involved creating **Lotería**, a game featuring images, descriptions, and words in four languages identified by the Puentes community members as prominent—English, Spanish, Nahuatl, and Q’eqchi’. Lotería is an important game that many members of the Puentes de Salud community grew up playing. The game allows children and families to match symbols from the game to the interactive mural, sparking dialogue about language and culture. The featured symbols and words were selected by the education and art teams to contrast with the images that children are familiar with in U.S. culture. It encourages children to engage with cultural symbols and learn about the traditions of the Latine community. This considers the importance of the many different languages that community members speak and, in turn, how important it is for parents to teach their children their mother tongues.

### ■ CODICES

The project also features **codices**—portable panels created through education and art-based workshops that capture and celebrate community knowledge, traditions, and skills. To inform the design of these panels, participants of all ages engaged in activities focused on cultural storytelling, skill-sharing, and artistic expression through exploration of traditional crafts and literacy-building practices such as fresco painting, tamal and tortilla making, basket weaving, textile arts, and oral history. These experiences are visually represented on the codices, preserving and expanding the shared knowledge for future use.

### ■ INTERACTIVE MAP

Finally, an **interactive map** is designed both to showcase the Latine community in Philadelphia and help the Puentes de Salud community explore the broader Philadelphia community, as members of the community expressed reluctance to go beyond their usual routine. Each mapped location has a physical or visual marker that was created by the Puentes art team reflecting their mission and importance to the immigrant community. These cultural murals and installations are located at neighborhood entities and spaces that were identified by community members as important to know for any newcomer to Philadelphia because they provide needed services, resources, and cultural connection. Families can use stickers to denote places they have visited and learn more about the history of the featured sites. This map of culturally inclusive and supportive spaces for children and families became a tool and symbol of welcoming this geographically expanding immigrant community.





# The Village of Arts and Humanities

The Village of Arts and Humanities engages more than 1,500 community members in activities that build civic power, nurture youth development, and model equitable neighborhood revitalization within the Fairhill-Hartranft neighborhood of North Philadelphia. The Village used art and local artists as a central theme to promote language and literacy in the neighborhood.



## Fairhill-Hartranft ABCs

The **Fairhill-Hartranft ABCs** features two vibrant literacy-rich murals created by local artists in collaboration with community residents. These murals incorporate elements of street art, while also giving the community members an interactive I-Spy component to spark conversation. By tying literacy activities to the area's rich history and culture, the project connects deeply with the unique identity of Fairhill-Hartranft.

The other components of the installation are a series of alphabet letter signs, alphabet murals from local artists, an online scavenger hunt that can also be paired with a physical booklet, and conversational cards. These playful learning components are all part of the Fairhill-Hartranft ABCs initiative, bringing children and families new and interactive ways to engage with art and storytelling of their neighborhood.

The yellow alphabet signs feature 26 cut-out letters that have been installed at local businesses, organizations and other various sites scattered throughout the neighborhood. On each letter, families will find a QR code that links to the Fairhill ABCs website, where families can take part in the letter scavenger hunt. The website also features





different playful learning activities pertaining to literacy goals, paired with various games and riddles for families to play and solve.

Additionally, The Village partnered with local artists to bring to life an art-inspired alphabet designed to encourage people across the neighborhood to be inspired by their community. Because every letter is designed in a unique and different way, these murals spark an artistic view on literacy and storytelling for the viewer to experience. The artistically designed alphabet letters are also featured in a physical Look Book.

Finally, literacy-focused conversation cards, available for digital download, invite children and adults to locate and record when they've found each letter in the neighborhood. Both the Look Book and the cards are filled with community-inspired artwork and interactive activities that encourage conversations, exploration, and literacy-rich experiences for families to engage with along the way.





# Impact of LRNI

The LRNI evaluation team examined the impact of 1) **deep community engagement** on the resulting installations and **sense of community ownership** over the project, and 2) the installations on **child-adult interactions** and **language use**.

## The evaluation partners aimed to answer the following primary questions:

- How does **engaging community members in the development** of a neighborhood literacy intervention impact the way that the community responds to the intervention?
- How do **place-based Playful Learning installations** affect a child's engagement with learning, literacy, and culture?

Community members, including parents of young children, CBO staff, community leaders, and advisory board members for the project participated in interviews, focus groups, and online and in-person surveys. Additionally, evaluation team members observed children and parents engaging with the installations during community events. Data was collected before the installation components had been installed and after most installation components were complete.<sup>4</sup> The combined analysis of these evaluation components highlights the impact of LRNI on communities and families.

Across the board, the CBOs and their respective community members were proud and enthusiastic about the resulting installations and what they had been able to do through LRNI. They felt a real sense of accomplishment with the project and were excited to show others what they had worked on.

The physical installations instilled a sense of pride in community and community spaces. CBOs and community members were pleased at having beautiful and interesting installations in their neighborhoods and community spaces, and both CBOs and community advisory board members commented that it was important for the project to result in physical installations and improvements to the neighborhood. They felt that the community seeing these physical outcomes of the project was



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4. Examples and quotes in this section are anonymized to align with research protocol.

critical and that community members would especially appreciate this aspect of the project. For instance, several people said that the installations made the neighborhood look better maintained and “added warmth” to the places where the installations were located. One community member shared during a focus group, “I like them. They make the neighborhood look nicer, friendlier, and cared for. All of the installations are intriguing...They are great additions to the neighborhood because of what they stand for and the physical beauty they bring to the neighborhood.”

From the perspective of CBOs, the project illustrated how literacy can be a through line in neighborhoods and communities. They found that the planning process helped to weave literacy into more community conversations and spaces (e.g. food, nature) and helped people see how literacy can be part of everyday practice. The resulting installations emphasized topics of relevance (e.g. cultural, places of local interest) to residents and community members to increase interest and build opportunities for everyday literacy opportunities in the neighborhood.

## This perspective is validated by data collected from **post-installation parent surveys**:



**Parents reported more frequent engagement** in two of six markers of literacy, language, and cultural enrichment at follow-up (after LRNI) compared to baseline (before LRNI): talking about what they were going to do that day and talking about memories from their child’s past.



Parents reported being “somewhat satisfied” with their neighborhoods on average (2.9 out of 4) before the LRNI project. **After LRNI, parents rated their neighborhoods a bit more highly** (3.1 out of 4), though the difference was not statistically significant.




**Parents rated their neighborhoods higher** in terms of offering opportunities (i.e., places to go and things to do) for families to support children’s learning after the LRNI projects had been installed and implemented (3.1), compared to before the LRNI project (2.8).

LRNI highlighted the importance of leveraging community connections, interests, talents, and skills for creating buy-in and ownership in the project and installations. One participant at a community focus group shared that “children who took part in creating the mural will return proudly and will show other people and talk about where their family came from. It was a community that made this mural.” A CBO staff member described the importance of having community members, including children, be such a core part of the project: “As valuable as the after-school programming is... those [programs] are within a framework that the kids don’t create. In this project, the community built the framework. That creates a greater sense of ownership. They come back; they protect it; none of the installation elements have graffiti; nothing has been touched. They contributed to the creation of it. That is the biggest thing. This is a project where they get to be the founders and builders and engineers.”



CBOs were also eager to incorporate the skills (e.g., artistic) that community members provided, in addition to their ideas for how to design the installations. Several CBOs were proud that they could feature the work of community members on different aspects of the project. One CBO staff member shared their experience drawing on local expertise: “She’s phenomenal, and she’s the voice of the project. So when you go to the website and you hear all the sounds, that’s [local artist], and she’s one of the artists. So it was lovely to also lift up local folks and make sure that they were really centered in the project all the way throughout.”

For many community members, the most powerful part of the project was bringing people together to celebrate their culture and who they are as a community. As one community member shared during a focus group, “I got closer to everybody on this call. I can’t even describe how it is, it is so powerful, the small conversations, people had so much to say...This is building actual power in our neighborhood.”



*Being able to get a grant to make such a project...I’ve been working with the community for so long, and it’s such a gift to be able to engage with this magnitude, like the different things that we can begin. Because this is just like a base start of something larger.*

While CBOs experienced challenges around community engagement in the beginning of the project due to COVID and staff turnover, among other reasons, there was strong consensus that all four projects ended with robust community involvement and a sense that LRNI was the beginning of deeper community involvement in such projects. One CBO staff member shared, “The community is...able to see promises fulfilled that haven’t been fulfilled before. So now, the community can trust more because they can be part of things more. The biggest success is that they will continue to engage in more ways to better their community. They will come out more and do more...there is a new sense of trust that they will be heard and they will be part of and they will expect it.”

While each community felt that the LRNI project was successful, the CBOs also reflected on the challenges of doing deep community work while mediating different expectations. CBOs reiterated for the duration of the project that they wanted community members to feel valued on the project and they wanted to implement community-generated ideas, but many ran up against logistical, financial, or legal/insurance constraints. They wanted to make sure that community members understood all the issues they faced in implementing their ideas and that community members felt valued and not ignored. They felt that this continuous explanation of when and why they had to make changes to community recommendations was important, but it also required intentional and frequent communication during the project.

# Initiative Challenges

As with any complex, multi-year, multi-stakeholder project, LRNI experienced challenges that slowed progress and needed to be addressed, but ultimately did not prevent success in the initiative.



## COVID-19 Pandemic

LRNI participants (CBOs and TA providers) developed their concepts and submitted their proposals in early February 2020—one month before a global pandemic would dramatically change public interactions for nearly two years. Starting a community- and place-based, multi-stakeholder initiative at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges. The success of LRNI depended on participants establishing and maintaining strong relationships with one another and their communities. However, the sudden disruption to life and daily interactions required significant rethinking of meeting and engagement plans. Further, at a time when many communities were facing upheaval and an uncertain future, the CBOs in this initiative had to reimagine their community engagement plans for LRNI while also attending to their communities' immediate basic needs. In some cases, this project provided a welcome opportunity for community connection at a time when many people were feeling isolated. However, the necessary shift to connect via virtual platforms and restrictions on social gatherings initially slowed efforts to build trust and connection with other LRNI participants and community members.

Ultimately, the CBOs and technical assistance providers found ways to foster meaningful engagement—with the communities and each other—but not without some delays and challenges along the way.

*It's hard to remember that we did this through a global pandemic, but we did, and it was meaningful to have this—something to work on together outside of ourselves during a time when people were physically retreating. We started on Zoom and then moved to in-person; we started in isolation then moved to in-person together. It was lovely to move through that time in history with purpose.*



## Approach to Project Design

In designing this initiative, the foundation worked with each CBO and each individual TA provider to develop their proposals; the CBOs and TA providers did not have the opportunity to engage directly with one another until after LRNI had launched, which created some barriers that had to be overcome in the early months of the initiative.

One example of this was the CBOs not initially feeling they had the option to **select how they leveraged the expertise of the participating** TA partners. Although the foundation's desire was for this to be a CBO-directed project, at least some of the CBOs felt a tension between having agency to envision and implement the project in their own neighborhoods and needing to engage with specific TA partners for what felt like predetermined activities.

In the absence of a collaborative project design process, participants entered with different visions for the role community engagement would play in the initiative.<sup>5</sup> The foundation designed the initiative with a vision that community members from each neighborhood would participate in the project along a defined timeline, including engaging in some specific activities, such as an interactive game designed by Mural Arts. Similarly, the evaluators' plans hinged on being able to engage members of each community in specific ways at specific times. In contrast, at least some of the CBOs entered with a vision of a process that was more community-driven, in which the approach to the work and the specific actions—including the evaluation—would be determined by the community members in a more emergent way, which would not necessarily align with the set steps and timeline laid out by the foundation and the TA partners. In the mid-2021 survey, CBOs described this disconnect, for example, "We are grateful and glad to be participating in this initiative, but we do think that there are ways in which it could be improved to better center the needs and desires of communities and to defer to the expertise and processes of community-based organizations."

This lack of role clarity and alignment created a dynamic at the start of the initiative where interactions between the CBOs, TA partners, and the foundation were marked by an underlying feeling of skepticism and mistrust. In some instances, the CBOs felt their expertise was not fully valued or respected by TA providers and the TA providers similarly felt their expertise was undervalued or unwanted. This skepticism was captured in a few comments during an all-initiative meeting in August 2021. For example, "The community-based organizations need more latitude to customize/adjust their engagement with TA providers to align with community needs and authentic co-design with our communities."

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5. Some CBOs expressed dislike for the term "community engagement" to describe their activities when connecting with community members.



While everyone stayed committed to the overall goals of the initiative, starting out on this tense foot meant that it took significant time and energy, exacerbated by not being able to meet in person due to COVID, to create strong working relationships among all the participants. This enduring commitment, plus open communication, made it possible for participants to overcome these challenges. The challenges were addressed through ongoing dialogue during online monthly all-initiative meetings, coordination and solution development during monthly TA provider meetings, and one-on-one conversations between the CBOs, TA providers, and the foundation. These frequent and personalized touch points led to mutually agreeable solutions and helped to deepen trust.



## Sustaining Momentum in a Multi-Year Project

Initially designed as a three-year project, it took four years to complete the installations in each of the four communities. Sustaining momentum for that amount of time was a challenge for CBOs and community members. In an effort that was so highly relational, a key challenge of a project of this duration was maintaining the focus and effort when engagement from the individuals participating fluctuated. In some cases, the community members who were engaged in the very early visioning sessions were not the same community members who were around for the installation ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Even for organizations like these four CBOs who are experienced at engaging community members, keeping people involved in the work over such a long period of time was a major undertaking, requiring significant staff time and effort.

This challenge was then magnified when CBOs experienced staff turnover, which all CBOs experienced during the initiative. In some instances, the intentional transition between old and new staff preserved operational and relational continuity. In other instances, the turnover resulted in a smaller team (e.g., down to one core person) who nevertheless held the project vision intact. In at least one instance, the transition resulted in the need to rebuild trust and relationships with neighborhood leaders over time. A phrase often mentioned by CBO members is that **projects like this “move at the speed of trust,”** and with staff transitions, maintaining internal and external trust became crucial for the initiative.

Despite the challenges posed by transitions in staffing and community member participation, the unwavering commitment of each organization’s leadership and staff kept the vision for their project, guiding everyone who joined the initiative toward its goals. For some CBOs, this increased staff turnover notably led to new connections and a more diverse group of stakeholders involved in the LRNI community network.



## Implementing Installation Visions Within Construction Constraints

As the project installations moved from concept to construction, the CBOs encountered a range of challenges. While the co-design process was rooted in creativity and community engagement, transitioning into fabrication brought logistical complexities—including navigating city licensing and inspections approvals, shifting site logistics, and adapting designs to meet evolving needs of each project.

In one example, a CBO planned to locate their installation at a centrally located site that was a favorite location by community vote. However, city permits were difficult to acquire and access to the site was ultimately denied. The team had to quickly pivot to identify a new location and secure a permanent partner willing to maintain the installation long-term. This process helped the team understand the **need for flexibility, relationship-building, and adaptive planning during the later stages of implementation**. A second CBO encountered similar challenges in partnering with a local entity to install the installations, but were ultimately successful in their bid.

Beyond the physical sites, CBOs also encountered challenges with contractors, as was the case for a CBO whose design team stopped responding to emails midway through the design process. This introduced an unexpected delay in the design process and caused the CBO a significant amount of stress as they fought to keep the project on track.

Technical assistance providers remained available throughout these challenges, offering problem-solving support as needed. Despite these challenges, all four CBOs successfully moved their projects forward with creativity and commitment, ensuring that each installation remained rooted in community values.





# Success Factors

Overcoming these challenges and accomplishing the initiative goals—completing installations in each neighborhood, meaningfully engaging community members, and improving access to resources that promote language and literacy development—required ongoing commitment, resilience, adaptability, and collaboration from all initiative participants. The TA providers', CBOs', and the foundation's ability to collaborate, address challenges, and adjust plans as needed were crucial in overcoming challenges and achieving the initiative's goals.



## Greater Flexibility

As time passed in the initiative, there was evolution across many project dimensions. These evolutions can be characterized as moving from a more rigid approach to a more flexible one.

### ■ Expanding the **scope of literacy**:

In its first year, the initiative adapted to a more inclusive definition of literacy, grounded in both the science of early language and literacy development and the cultural components of literacy that CBOs experienced in promoting literacy in their communities.

### ■ Adapting how **TA providers and CBOs interact**:

Once there was a better understanding of TA offerings and CBOs' wishes and project needs, the TA providers adapted their approaches accordingly, in collaboration with the foundation. This included the program evaluation team adapting its data collection plan (timing and specific questions) based on feedback from the CBOs, PLL having a representative join Mt. Airy's planning and design team, and Community Wealth Partners evolving their role to include mediator and counselor when initiative participants needed to navigate internal tensions and difficult communications.

### ■ Increased **variation in the process** for installation design:

The original design of the initiative envisioned all four CBOs creating at least three literacy-promoting installations inspired by playful learning by proceeding through a similar process along a similar timeline. However, it became apparent that additional flexibility and variation would be needed in order to enable each CBO to participate in a way that felt authentic to their organization and community. As a result, the foundation and TA providers needed to adjust some of their expectations and elements of their scopes of work.

Taken together, these shifts from the original design of the initiative toward more flexibility in how the work played out enabled participants to better achieve the initiative goals. Creating more room for variation in the approach taken by the CBOs allowed for a final product in each community that truly reflected the uniqueness of each CBO and the input from their communities. These shifts were noticed and appreciated by participants. In an end-of-year 2022 survey, participants responded affirmatively to a question of whether the initiative had effectively adapted in response to feedback, with an average rating of 4.1 out of 5. And, in a final participant survey at the end of the installation phase in fall 2024, ratings on the initiative centering the knowledge and views of the community increased from 3.0 in mid-2021 to 4.5 out of 5.

However, it is also important to note that the continual evolution of the project created unanticipated complexities for the TA providers' scopes of work and the evaluation of the initiative as a whole. On a late-2022 survey question of whether the initiative had evolved in ways that were helpful and improved the experience, CBOs gave an average rating of 4.1 whereas TA providers had an average rating of 3.6. In particular, the evolution to four distinct projects on different timelines made it challenging for evaluators to define the "intervention" in order to determine its impact and define "pre" and "post" moments in time for data collection.



## Additional Time and Funding

In addition to greater flexibility, more funding and time were also key to the completion of three installations in each neighborhood. The foundation made a significant financial investment in LRNI, and the initial three-year timeline for the project seemed spacious. However, as the initiative got underway, it became clear that achieving the initiative goals would be more time- and resource-intensive than anticipated. The early steps of launching the initiative were slowed by confusion about each participant's role, the need to clarify a shared definition of literacy, and the challenges of adjusting community engagement and meeting plans to the new realities of the early months of the COVID pandemic. Delays with key milestones continued to push the timeline further. Even after all four CBOs had preliminary designs and had contracted with a design firm, staff turnovers, design challenges, and bureaucratic roadblocks in getting access to the installation locations caused additional delays. As the complexity of the design and building processes grew for the CBOs, and COVID disruptions increased construction material costs, concerns over the constraints of a fixed timeline and budget also increased.

When the foundation agreed to extend the timeline and offer additional budget to account for the real costs of necessary changes, LRNI participants, particularly the CBOs, expressed relief and were able to commit to meeting the revised timeline. As one CBO participant said, "The funding and project timeline were significant factors for us. Funding allowed us to hire community members



and artists to create our projects by hand. The gracious timeline of several years gave us the time to incorporate community feedback and create experiences at each phase of our project.”

The extension of the timeline and the opportunity for participants to request additional funds to support the work was critical to the initiative’s success in creating three installations in each of the four neighborhoods, though it had implications on other aspects of the project. For instance, the extended timeline meant that the initiative concluded so soon after the installations were complete that it was nearly impossible to observe installation-inspired changes in the four communities. Similarly, there was limited time for the CBOs to organize programming connected to the installations to help promote and sustain literacy-rich neighborhoods. Indeed, a handful of people commented on the need to further develop and implement programming that would engage community members in using the installations and more thoroughly develop literacy skills.



# Project Learning and Key Takeaways

The LRNI project was a learning and growing experience for all partners and achieved the initiative's original objectives. The initiative energized four CBOs and their community partners and stakeholders to affirm and envision their neighborhoods as already rich in language and literacy, and to leverage those assets in creating physical installations to promote playful learning, adult-child interaction, and early literacy development. The process of designing these installations created a focal point for community engagement around neighborhood-informed language and literacy and became a physical embodiment of the community's ideas, identities, and resources. This process and focus helped to create potentially long-lasting community engagement impacting literacy and beyond.

That said, LRNI also experienced significant challenges stemming from the original design assumptions of the initiative, along with the start of the initiative coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ultimate success of the initiative reflects the resilience, persistence, and adaptability of all initiative participants. This openness and flexibility, in the spirit of achieving a common goal, enabled the CBOs to complete their neighborhood installations and for participants to build a network for learning and support.

In reviewing all data collected during this project and reflecting on the experiences together, the TA provider team **offers the following summary of the project insights.**

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## ■ **Community-designed literacy installations promote literacy engagement and contribute to more connected communities.**

CBOs and communities recognize that literacy is foundational for community well-being and connectedness, not just for children but also for families and adults of all ages. Stakeholders broadly support that literacy development is integral to community empowerment. By embedding literacy in community and neighborhood spaces through installations, partnerships, and programming, LRNI supported learning and also contributed to more connected and cohesive communities.

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## ■ **Community engagement is a process and an outcome.**

Though community engagement was a central part of the process outlined for this initiative, a key impact has been to elevate literacy as a shared responsibility where families, educators, organizations, and community members work together. Facilitated by the CBOs, the initiative



deepened existing relationships within neighborhoods, fostered intergenerational participation, and built new cross-organizational partnerships.

The resulting installations—their placement, content, and style—embedded literacy into everyday life in the neighborhoods with connections to culture, people, and history. In surveys administered after the installations were complete, parents reported increased opportunities for learning in their neighborhoods, with a statistically significant rise in ratings of “places to go and things to do” for children’s learning. Parental engagement in early literacy activities increased after the project, with a significant rise in practices shown to support early literacy, such as parents talking about daily plans and discussing memories with children. Parents appeared more confident and ready to embed literacy activities into their everyday routines with children and more aware of the community resources and opportunities for their children’s learning.

For community members and organizations deeply engaged in the initiative, the physical installations became symbols of neighborhood identity and resourcefulness. Community members took pride in the visible transformation of public spaces, and, in the process, the CBOs earned the trust of their communities and are positioned to lead and advance future community-driven projects.

## Literacy is an existing community-driven asset.

The William Penn Foundation chose the four specific CBOs because the communities and neighborhoods they serve have historically experienced economic and social marginalization and continue to struggle for equitable educational resources and opportunities. Community members who take great pride in these neighborhoods are particularly sensitive to the media narrative and public perception that narrowly focuses on the educational and resource deficits and implicit blame assigned to the residents. LRNI demonstrates that this narrative is at best lopsided and the perception of residents’ lack of engagement in children’s education is plain wrong. Surveys collected from parents across all four CBOs’ communities before completing the final installations found high levels of parent engagement in their children’s learning and development. Children showed high interest in learning about family, culture, and community. Children were regularly involved in rich early learning activities, like drawing, singing, and pretend reading. Most parents not only recognized school as a resource for literacy but also used community resources to support their children’s learning.

Led by the CBOs, the LRNI community engagement process challenged traditional deficit-based views of literacy and Philadelphia neighborhoods, instead emphasizing community strengths, multilingualism, storytelling, and cultural heritage. Rather than focusing only on typical school-age skills (e.g., letter recognition, vocabulary, reading comprehension), CBOs and community members came together around an expanded understanding of literacy that includes language and literacy skills and experiences, human relationships, and community assets.

## ■ Literacy-focused installations can take many forms and exist in everyday spaces where families live and connect.

The initiative demonstrated that literacy-focused efforts can thrive in many community settings, from health clinics to playgrounds to historical sites and schoolyards. When it comes to physical installations, there was no one-design-fits-all approach. Ultimately, they included murals with interactive elements, playgrounds integrated into a school, signage and markers that led families to people and places they can explore, and storytellers and recorders placed in historical sites. This multi-site, multi-design approach to embedding literacy into everyday spaces and daily routines meets and welcomes families where they live and connect.

## ■ Literacy-rich neighborhoods can be built by recognizing and celebrating community strengths.

An important element of the initiative was to develop and install literacy-promoting playful learning installations in neighborhood and community spaces to promote literacy-rich adult-child conversations. While this remained a central deliverable for all CBOs throughout the project, the community engagement practices of the CBOs increasingly focused on identifying, recognizing, and strengthening opportunities for literacy already present in their communities.

Each CBO explored the strengths within their organizational history and their community to drive their theory of change. The completed installations reflected the spirit and intent of each CBO and community's conceptualization of literacy and neighborhood.



**The Village of Arts and Humanities incorporated literacy into community placemaking**, using public art to foster intergenerational dialogue, storytelling, and community-wide advocacy.



**Puentes de Salud framed literacy as a tool to affirm immigrant families' rich cultural identity** and encourage multilingual literacy practices through El Proyecto Grandote.



**Mt. Airy CDC designed three interactive installations, each emphasizing storytelling, historical and local connections, and playful learning opportunities** in outdoor settings. These installations integrate literacy with nature, community history, and African American heritage distinct to the Germantown and Mt. Airy neighborhoods.



**Indochinese American Council intentionally sought to strengthen literacy through learning spaces** that build bridges between school classrooms and community. Their school-community partnerships helped to design the installations and determine where they should be located.



## ■ Successful community-centered efforts require emergent, flexible approaches.

Overall, this project highlighted the importance of flexibility for all participating organizations. Whether it was a global pandemic or changes to project teams, the LRNI project continually evolved, pushing organizations to show flexibility. This persistence and flexibility through challenges raise several recommendations that provide guidance to future organizations and funders.

This initiative affirmed that place-based work needs time and collaboration to adapt an abstract theory of change into a concrete plan rooted in community needs and assets. While prescribed solutions are not necessary, structure (budget and timeline), expectations (deliverables), and guidance (technical assistance) can all be helpful, so long as the community has the space and power to be creative and responsive to their unique contexts.



# Recommendations

A project with the size and scope of the Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative, consisting of several CBOs, TA providers, and evaluators, can provide guidance for other funders, organizations, and partners interested in pursuing community-informed efforts. These recommendations reflect analysis of data collected, stakeholder feedback, and the overall considerations of those immersed in LRNI across the last five years. These recommendations intend to address and mitigate potential pitfalls of large-scale community-based work. The aim is to provide actionable insights and strategic guidance to enhance the effectiveness and impact of future projects.

## Specific recommendations include:

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### GRANTMAKERS

Engage grantees and other stakeholders early in the project planning process to help define program elements and promote ownership.

The success of place-based initiatives like LRNI hinges on CBO leadership, community partnership, and, ultimately, co-ownership. Listening to the community and adapting community engagement approaches to each neighborhood's needs and assets lays the foundation for meaningful and sustainable progress. Especially in projects with several partner organizations, involving grant recipients in project planning can contribute to greater clarity in project, evaluation, research, and collaboration expectations. Foundations can support this by providing opportunities for partner organizations to engage in the full planning process. While structure is important, empowering grantees helps them to take ownership of their project and may lead to a higher likelihood of success.

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### RESEARCHERS AND EVALUATORS

Work closely with the community to understand and define collective learning goals and ways to measure them.

Unlike a well-prescribed intervention within a carefully designed scientific experiment, a place-based and community-led initiative will learn and grow as it adapts to its neighborhood context, as well as to external events (e.g., pandemic disruptions). Consequently, researchers and evaluators need time to engage with and learn alongside the CBOs in order to develop measurement instruments and evaluation methodologies. Without sacrificing the rigor and principles of sound research, a participatory evaluation design and planning period would give evaluators the opportunity to understand both shared and distinct project goals, propose and negotiate measures of success, and invite joint investment from all partners in what the evaluation can learn.

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### COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

To minimize the impact of staff departures on a project, orient and share the project goals and aspirations with your greater team and keep them informed throughout.

Staff turnover is inherent to any organization. Loss of organizational and project knowledge that comes with staff turnovers can threaten progress. Staff turnover can also stymie efforts that are dependent on community relationships. While turnover is inevitable, engaging several people in projects when feasible can reduce the impact of staff departures. Organizations can lessen the severity of turnover by orienting staff to the project, even though they may not be active participants in the day-to-day operations. Awareness of the project, its goals, progress, and key partners will minimize the consequences of changes to personnel.

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# Conclusion

Over the past four years, the Literacy-Rich Neighborhoods Initiative project built partnerships, recognized community assets, and elevated the collective commitment to early literacy across Philadelphia communities and neighborhoods. LRNI harnessed their collective power toward creating more places and spaces to promote early language and literacy development. At its conclusion, the initiative succeeded in engaging community members in developing multiple opportunities in their neighborhoods for families with young children to interact in ways that supported early literacy skills and connected families. By focusing on the concrete deliverables of playful learning installations, the initiative helped to rally Community-Based Organizations and communities to come together and work toward an inclusive vision of *“neighborhood-rich literacy.”*

The success of neighborhood-rich literacy initiatives depends as much on building and maintaining relationships with communities as on placing installations and implementing programs. Now that the physical installations are complete, building organizational and human infrastructure that maintains relationships amid personnel changes will be essential for continuing the momentum built during the initiative.

What sustains such an initiative? Who in the community shares ownership and responsibility, not just over the installations but also the spirit embodied by the four-year process to design and develop these installations? At the end of the project, the CBOs and their relationships with community members and partners share hope and optimism for maintaining the hard-earned momentum of early literacy across these Philadelphia neighborhoods.

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