



Request for Inquiries

**INFORMAL LEARNING
INITIATIVE**

Introduction

The William Penn Foundation (WPF) has a long history of investing in early learning and K-12 education with a focus on school readiness, early literacy, and high school completion. We aim to increase the number of children from Philadelphia’s underserved communities who experience academic success.

WPF seeks to expand citywide learning opportunities outside of schools and centers by supporting the creation, refinement, or expansion of informal literacy programming. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to provide literacy-rich experiences in underserved communities and better understand how informal learning impacts child and caregiver interest, ability, and engagement with literacy.

Background

Based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, reading performance of third graders in Philadelphia has not changed significantly since 2009.¹ Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is critical, as it is a strong predictor of high school graduation and career success.² Fortunately, providing language and literacy-rich experiences at young ages can increase the likelihood that children read proficiently in later grades.³

The time spent outside of formal settings (i.e. schools or early learning centers) offers valuable informal learning opportunities to engage children and adults in activities that support language development. In fact, cities are looking to partner with informal learning institutions to improve school readiness and increase access to learning opportunities.⁴ Research also shows that “children learn best in active, engaged, constructive, and interactive environments”⁵ with meaningful content.⁶ Informal settings are particularly suitable for such experiences.

Unfortunately, children and families in low-income communities are less likely to visit informal learning institutions. A national survey revealed that kindergarteners “living in the most affluent households were three times more likely to visit a library or a museum than children living in the most impoverished households.”⁷

National trends are reflected in the situation in Philadelphia. The BUILD Initiative and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education conducted “A Study on Early Learning Services in Museums and Libraries” in Philadelphia. The study revealed that families visit libraries more often than museums, but that they do have a desire to visit museums more often. However, parents report several barriers to increasing visits: cost, location, adequate staff, welcoming facilities, and opportunities for hands-on learning.⁸

Informal Learning Initiative

WPF requests Letters of Inquiry for two-year projects that seek to take a **community approach** to engage children and families in literacy-building experiences through informal learning.

WPF seeks to fund 7-10 programs provided in partnership between an informal learning institution and a community-based organization. Examples of such entities are provided below.

- **Informal learning institutions:** museums, science centers, makerspaces, arts organizations, libraries, historic houses, cultural centers, and others.
- **Community-based organizations:** social service organizations, neighborhood associations, religious institutions, medical providers, community development organizations, recreation centers, and others that are firmly rooted in their communities and serve families with young children.

The objectives of the two-year (August 2017-August 2019) initiative are to:

- **Implement** high-quality, age appropriate, informal literacy programming in underserved communities in Philadelphia;
- **Develop or strengthen** partnerships between informal learning institutions and community-based organizations;
- **Identify** program practices and strategies that successfully reach underserved families

and young children ages 0-8 in informal learning experiences;

- **Evaluate** the impact of informal learning experiences on children and caregivers;
- **Build** a network of informal learning professionals and educators to foster peer learning, collaboration, and resource sharing; and
- **Disseminate** evaluation findings to relevant stakeholders, including museum and community-based practitioners, sector leaders, and funders.

The ultimate goal of this initiative is to provide literacy-rich experiences in underserved communities and better understand how informal learning impacts child and caregiver interest, ability, and engagement with literacy.

Project Criteria

Proposed projects should be informed by research and evidence. While projects will be unique to each partnership, community, and target audience, there are common characteristics that proposed projects should address, including:

Thematic	The experience is multi-disciplinary and based on a language and literacy goal that is integrated into meaningful content (e.g. math, science, technology, art, history, nature, civics, everyday life, etc.). The experience makes learning relevant to children’s current and new knowledge.
Hands-on & Interactive	The experience allows for interactive exploration and engagement. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social play: child-adult, child-child interaction• Exploratory, object play: manipulation/symbolic representation of objects• Pretend/Socio-dramatic play: make-believe• Media play: use of technology/games
Community-Based	The project is led in partnership between an informal learning institution and a community-based organization. The planning and development of the experience incorporates input from the audience who will be served. The program is based on the community’s specific needs, assets, and interests.
Accessibility	Programming is held in welcoming and accessible locations during convenient times for children and families. Programming should be independent of enrollment in an early learning center or school.
Family Engagement	The experience views caregivers as active participants and empowers them to understand and enact roles that support continued language and literacy learning.
Extension	The experience includes materials, activities, or digital resources for caregivers to extend learning beyond the structured activity. The project also allows families to visit the main location of the informal learning institution at no or low cost.
Audience	The experience serves children and families from a specific low-income community in Philadelphia. The project is designed for infants/toddlers, pre-school children, and/or elementary children (up to grade 3).
Measurable	The project identifies relevant metrics that could potentially be used to measure implementation and impact.

Evaluation

Funded projects will participate in an external, outcomes-based evaluation. The evaluation will assess whether informal learning programs in community settings impact:

- **Child** engagement, interest, and ability to engage in literacy experiences;
- **Caregiver** habits, attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to supporting literacy learning; and
- **Organizational** capacity to engage with families and communities effectively.

Participation in the program evaluation will be expected through data submission, ongoing communication, and iterative improvement.

Project Results

Between August 2017 and August 2019, a hands-on and thematic informal learning program will have been implemented in a low-income community in Philadelphia. An external evaluation will assess particular outcomes.

Desired Teams

Community-based organizations and informal learning institutions of any size are encouraged to apply in partnership. Teams should designate a lead partner who will serve as the primary project manager and liaison with WPF.

While experience collaborating with each other in the past is preferred, it is not required. If invited to the proposal stage, there will be an opportunity to further develop partnership details after submission.

The teams will be assessed on a number of factors, including:

- Legal status as a 501c(3) public charity (of the lead organization);
- Expertise in successfully delivering high-quality learning experiences to children;
- Strong content knowledge in early literacy practices;
- Proven ability to manage partnerships and reach underserved communities;
- Leadership and institutional resources to implement the project successfully.

Budget

It is expected that expenses for the project will be covered by a two-year grant from WPF. However, larger projects for which WPF funding is only a portion of project costs are also welcome. Preliminary project budgets should be all-inclusive, including any fees to partner organizations or consultants (e.g. literacy expert, graphic designer). This can be provided in the Inquiry Form narrative.

The most competitive inquiries will have total project budgets up to \$200,000. Total funding from WPF should not exceed 25% of participating organizations' operating budgets during the grant period.

All aspects of project development and execution, including planning, design, materials, community engagement, staffing, and implementation, are eligible for funding. External evaluation costs should not be included, as this will be covered by WPF separately.

Timeline

January 20, 2017

Inquiry submission period opens

February 17, 2017

Inquiry forms due by 5:00 PM EST

February 28, 2017

Select applicants invited to submit proposals

March 31, 2017

Proposals due by 5:00 PM EST

July 21, 2017

Board review of selected proposals

August 2017 - August 2019

Program implementation and evaluation

Process

The application process begins by submitting an [Inquiry Form](#) through the WPF website by **February 17**. The Great Learning team will review all Inquiry Forms and invite select applicants to submit a full proposal.

In addition to the Inquiry Form, please attach a brief summary as “additional documentation” describing the project’s key staff, target age group, number of children to be served, and program duration and level of exposure.

The responses in the Inquiry Form should describe relevant information about both partner organizations and not only about the lead organization.

This request or any subsequent response does not commit William Penn Foundation or the responding organization to any future funding or engagement. If you have any questions, contact Anairis Hinojosa at ahinojosa@williampennfoundation.org.

¹ Nation's Report Card: National Assessment of Educational Progress District Trends. See https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/#reading/district/trends/XP?grade=4

² Lesnick, J., Goerge, R., Smithgall, C., & Gwynne J. (2010). *Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment?* Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from https://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Reading_on_Grade_Level_111710.pdf

³ Dickinson, D. K. & Tabors, P. O. (2001). *Beginning Literacy with Language: Young Children Learning at Home and School. Ch. 4* Brookes Publishing.

⁴ Swan, D. W., Grimes, J., Owens, T., Vese, R. D. Jr., Miller, K., Arroyo, J., & O'Shea, P. (2013). *Public libraries in the United States survey: Fiscal year 2013*. Institute of Museum and Library Services. Retrieved from <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/plsfy2013.pdf>

⁵ Chi, M. T. H. (2009). *Active-constructive-interactive: A conceptual framework for differentiating learning activities*. Topics in Cognitive Science. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1756-8765.2008.01005.x/abstract>

⁶ Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R., Berk, L., & Singer, D. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in preschool: Presenting the evidence*. Oxford University Press.

⁷ Swan, D. (2013). *Kindergarteners' Visitation to Libraries and Museums*. Institute of Museum and Library Services. Retrieved from <https://www.ims.gov/news-events/upnext-blog/2013/08/kindergarteners%E2%80%99-visitation-libraries-and-museums>

⁸ Sirinides, P., Fink, R., & DuBois, T. (2016). *A Study on Early Learning Services in Museums and Libraries*. Early Childhood Education Journal. Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-016-0820-z>