

ENSURING SUCCESS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The area of human services is a long-standing priority for members of the Association of Small Foundations (ASF). According to the ASF 2007-2008 Foundation Operations & Management Report, members gave more than \$900 million to education in their most recent fiscal year, followed by human services. At the core of both education and human services funding is the well-being of children and families. This discussion guide, one in the series Investing in Strategies to Serve Vulnerable Children and Families, is designed to: provide clear and concise information to ASF members and other small foundations on strategies for supporting nonprofits that serve vulnerable children and families; and to share concrete ways that small foundations can invest in creating productive adulthoods for vulnerable children.

This discussion guide series is funded by and draws on the experience, learning, and resources of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Casey Foundation is the largest philanthropy in the U.S. dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable children and families. The Foundation is driven by its mission to find the most effective solutions that narrow the gap between children growing up in areas of concentrated poverty and their peers. Their work reflects the core belief that children do well when their families are strong and families in supportive communities are able to raise healthy and productive children.

MAKING THE CASE

Four-year old Carson Crunk of Anderson, Alabama loves his “Curious George” book. But he didn’t get the book at the library or at a bookstore. He got the book at the doctor’s office, during a checkup. Carson’s doctor – like hundreds of other medical providers across the US – gives children age-appropriate books along with their vaccinations as part of their well-child checkups through age five. Said Carson’s mother, “He loves books...and we’ll read to him at night and he’ll tell us what the pictures in the book are.”

Carson’s doctor is able to do this because of her clinic’s participation in the Reach Out and Read Program, a nonprofit children’s literacy program that has received support from foundations across the US, including ASF members The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation and Leighty Foundation, among others. Reach Out and Read works with medical providers to reach children between six months and five years, like Carson, who is one lucky boy. He gets a book when he visits the doctor, his parents read to him at night, and he appears to be on track to read at grade level by third grade.

A popular saying among educators is, “Until third grade, a child leans to read. After third grade, a child reads to learn.” In pre-school and the first few years of school, the aim is to teach children to read. After third grade, the aim is for children to use their reading comprehension skills to learn new material. Why is early childhood literacy, especially reading at grade level by third grade, so important? Research shows that reading abilities in third grade act as a tell-tale barometer for later school success, since children who read at grade level are more likely to graduate from high school. And those who graduate from high school are more likely to pursue further education or get a job.

This discussion guide is focused on strategies for supporting nonprofits that provide early childhood education programs and services, especially those that focus on early childhood literacy and reading at grade level by third grade. The guide identifies the common issues in early childhood literacy, suggests ways you can invest in this specific area, and provides questions for discussion and references to find additional information and resources. Whether you already fund programs that address early childhood literacy, or are thinking of doing so, the guide will spark your thinking and deepen your understanding of effective strategies to support nonprofits that prepare young children for success in school – and life.

DEFINING THE ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY

If Carson Crunk, thanks in part to his “Curious George” book, is reading at grade level by the end of third grade, he will likely be in the minority of students. In 2005, only 31% of children entering fourth grade read at a “proficient” or better level. Moreover, the gap between racial/ethnic groups is wide – while 41% of White and 42% of Asian-American fourth graders score at or above the “proficient” level, just 13% of African-American, 16% of Hispanic-American, and 18% of American Indian fourth graders do. This gap is associated with socioeconomic status and parental involvement with reading. Consider these facts:

- A child from a middle-income family typically enters first grade with about 1,000 hours of one-on-one picture book reading time with parents, other relatives, or teachers, compared with a child from a low-income family, who averages less than 100 hours.
- First graders from lower-income families have a vocabulary half the size of children from higher-income families.
- By age 3, children in low-income homes will have heard one-third as many words as children in middle and high-income homes (10 million versus 30 million words).

Gaps such as these are difficult to close by the time a child completes third grade, making programs that target children early, from birth to 5, all the more important. Children who enter kindergarten with poor early literacy skills (see box) tend to be poor readers in first grade and even into high school. Ten to fifteen percent of children with serious reading problems will drop out of high school, and about half of youth with criminal records or with a history of substance abuse have reading problems.

Early literacy skills encompass a child’s:

- Vocabulary;
- Print awareness;
- Knowledge of the alphabet;
- Awareness of the sounds that letters make and ability to connect sounds with letters;
- Written expression; and
- Motivation to read and interest in stories

Early literacy skills do not emerge spontaneously but require time and practice.

HOW YOU AS A FUNDER CAN ACT

There are many ways that you as a funder can act to support early childhood education programs that address the issues identified above and put children on track to read at grade level by the time they complete third grade. Look to fund organizations providing programs that:

- Support comprehensive early literacy programs and services that begin at birth and provide services to both parents and children;
- Engage the community and pool community-wide resources;
- Focus on closing the reading proficiency gap among children from minority or low-income households and that provide extra support for their teachers and caregivers; and
- Provide quality instruction.

Also, look to fund programs that engage in advocacy work on early literacy, and don’t forget that as a funder, you can give more than grants.

Comprehensive Early Literacy Programs and Services

Research on early literacy points to three key facts in putting children on track to read at grade level by third grade: 1) the best interventions begin before kindergarten; 2) parenting differences add up; and 3) both home and educational environments must support building children’s early literacy skills. Consider funding organizations that provide comprehensive early literacy programs and services such as:

- Early literacy programs that combine parent literacy, parent education, and child-focused instruction, as well as programs that provide children with meals and access to preventive health care services. In Atlanta, for example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is working in five low-income neighborhoods to close the gap in third grade reading through its comprehensive Children Healthy and Prepared for Success in School (CHAPSS) program for children aged 0-8 that involves schools, families, and communities.
- Adult and parent education programs that have home visits as an integral component of the program and that train and encourage parents, relatives, and other adults to talk with, read to, and work to build children's early literacy skills through one-on-one reading and instruction. Home visit programs can also help educate parents about child health, nutrition, and safety.
- Pre-school, kindergarten, and first, second, and third grade reading programs that take advantage of a child's natural affinity for technology, using learning systems and computer-assisted tutorials such as the LeapPad program and SuccessMaker. Research is already pointing to the fact that children who use technology to read are more likely to read every day.

Community Engagement

Because public funding for education is often inadequate, it is important to look for organizations with programs that stretch these dollars by emphasizing community engagement, coordination, and pooling of resources and services. Organizations that engage the community in early literacy will typically have programs such as:

- Book distribution programs that are linked to elementary schools, community centers, places of worship, and other places where you find parents and children together (like the doctors' offices and health clinics that Reach Out and Read works with).
- Book reading programs in which every child in school receives a copy of the same title, teachers incorporate the book's text and theme into lessons, and the children go on related field trips. Book reading programs can also be implemented community-wide, encouraging a school district, city, or county to read the same book. In considering funding these programs, remember that public schools generally don't have the budgetary resources for such programs. Elementary schools in Chicago were able to participate in the national-level "Read for the Record" program, organized by the non-profit Jumpstart, in which elementary school children across the country read "Corduroy," because of private foundation funding.
- Elementary school or community center spelling bees.

Closing the Reading Proficiency Gap among Disadvantaged and Minority Children

The achievement gap in reading is profound – children of color and/or from low-income or non-English speaking households fail to reach grade level reading abilities by third grade because, quite simply, they are already behind when they start kindergarten. For example, there is a striking disparity in access to books at home between children of middle- and low-income households: the average middle-income home has 54 age-appropriate books for children, while a low-income home has 0-2. To address the achievement gap, consider supporting organizations that:

- Identify high-achieving students from lower-income families and provide early literacy services to keep these children on track to read at grade level by third grade. These students rank in the top quartile on standardized tests, but because they lack academic support or parental involvement, they fall behind by fourth grade.
- Offer extra encouragement to parents and caregivers to participate in their children's education, such as "Pajama Read Night," where children and their parents (or grandparents) come to school dressed in their pajamas to read together over milk and cookies.
- Provide adult education and literacy programs for Spanish or other limited-English speaking families and children.
- Develop teacher-leaders in literacy and provide these teacher-leaders with additional professional development and access to literacy consultants who can assist in classrooms, help develop lesson plans, and coach other teachers.

Quality Instruction

High-quality literacy programs provide instruction that allows children to practice their early literacy skills often, motivates them to read, and builds their self esteem and initiative around reading. Look to support organizations that:

- Work to improve early literacy skills instruction and bolster curriculum and teacher and caregiver training in child care centers, pre-schools, kindergartens, and elementary schools.
- Have a core curriculum that includes one-to-one tutoring for low-achieving first and second graders such as Reading Recovery; guided reading programs in which teachers work in small groups of children to observe, guide, and encourage them as they read texts matched to their reading level; and phonics awareness programs such as SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words).

Advocacy

While foundations cannot engage in partisan political activity, lobbying, or earmark grants for lobbying purposes, they can fund and engage in advocacy! Here are some ways funders can engage in advocacy on early literacy:

- Provide project support or general operating support to community-wide early literacy networks of agencies, professionals, and parents that can pool resources for training, make bulk purchases of books (especially books in children's home languages) for book distribution programs, leverage community funding with regional or national funding for early literacy programs, and engage in advocacy work, including public awareness campaigns, on early literacy, especially at the local and state levels, where many key education decisions are still made.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper on the need to provide state funding for book distribution programs or email your local state house representative or senator about the need to establish a state department of early education (Massachusetts is the first in the nation to have such a department);
- Organize a "Curious George" education day for local policymakers, bringing in experts to educate the policymakers and provide a forum for them to dialog with pre-schools, child care centers, kindergartens, elementary schools, non-profits, and parents on issues related to early childhood literacy.

To learn more about how private foundations *can and cannot* engage in advocacy, see the ASF Primer listed in Resources and Additional Information section below.

Giving More than Grants

Foundations have much to offer beyond their philanthropic funds. Employ your knowledge, power to convene, reputation, visibility, and communications capacity. The depth and range of challenges in early childhood education make it difficult for smaller funders to make large-scale impact in isolation or by grantmaking alone. A few ways to use all your assets – not just financial resources – include:

- Convene a group of diverse stakeholders to talk about early literacy. Because the goal of strengthening early literacy and closing the third grade reading gap encompasses an array of services and partners, communities whose stakeholders work together will be at an advantage.
- Convene your grantees for a peer learning workshop. Document their successful strategies – and missteps – and post their stories and lessons on your website and share them with other funders and policymakers.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Take a few minutes to reflect on these famous quotes about reading:

"There is more treasure in books than in all the pirate's loot on Treasure Island."
– Walt Disney

"Children are made readers on the laps of their parents."
– Emilie Buchwald

“Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”
– Frederick Douglass

What do these quotes tell you about the importance of early childhood literacy, as well as the enduring detriment of illiteracy? What do these quotes reveal about the elements of effective early childhood literacy programs?

2. What funding strategies do you think would be the most effective ones for your foundation – or other small foundations – to pursue? Why?

3. *Number of Future Jail Cells Needed = Number of Children Failing Third Grade Reading Tests.* In some states, including California, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia, the failure rate on third grade reading tests is now used to help project the number of jail cells that will be needed when those third graders are adults. Does this fact shock you? Why or why not? As a funder, what you can do to help change this equation?

4. Keeping in mind that one critical element of a successful early childhood literacy program is community-wide involvement, what activities are going on in your community that you could take part in? If you are funding in this program area, would a partnership make sense? Who might you partner with? Who are some other small foundations and groups in your community that already work in early childhood literacy?



Ideas from your discussion (use this space to jot down ideas generated by the discussion):

RESOURCES AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. Annie E. Casey Foundation (www.aecf.org)
 - 2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-being
 - Atlanta Civic Site and Children Healthy and Prepared for Success in School (CHAPSS) program (www.atlantacivicsite.org)
2. “Closing the Gap in 3rd Grade Reading Levels,” Education Week (May 7, 2008), Vol. 27, Issue 36
3. Family Funders Network (www.familyfunders.org)
 - Issue Briefs on The Early Childhood Years: Connecting Children, Families, Schools, and Communities to Build School Readiness; Healthy Births; Healthy Children; Parents & Children; Early Childhood Care & Education; Transition to School; Early Literacy
4. Foundation for Child Development (www.fcd-us.org/)
5. Grantmakers for Education (www.gfe.org)
6. “Improving Public Education: A Guide for Donors to Make a Difference,” The Association of Small Foundations; Grantmakers for Education; Social Venture Partners, 2006 (www.educationdonor.org)
7. Jumpstart (www.jstart.org)
8. “Kids get checkup and a book,” Times Daily (Florence, AL), July 24, 2008 (<http://www.timesdaily.com/article/20080724/NEWS/807240323>)
9. “Ladders of Learning: Fighting Fade-Out by Advancing PK-3 Alignment,” Issue Brief #2, January 2006, New America Foundation, Early Childhood Initiative (www.newamerica.net)
10. National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org)
11. Parents as Teachers (www.patnc.org)
12. Parent-Child Home Program (www.parent-child.org)
13. “Prenatal through Pre-K: Building Bright Futures,” Zero to Three, 2007 (www.zerotothree.org)
14. “Primer on Funding and Engaging in Advocacy,” Association of Small Foundations, 2007 (www.smallfoundations.org)
15. Reach Out and Read (www.reachoutandread.org)
16. Reading Recovery Council of North America (www.readingrecovery.org)
17. School Readiness Indicators Initiative (www.gettingready.org)

OTHER DISCUSSION GUIDES IN THIS SERIES

This discussion guide is one in a series on specific topics related to investing in strategies to serve vulnerable children and families. For other discussion guides, and for information on hosting an ASF Local Program, please contact ASF toll-free at 888-212-9922 or asf@smallfoundations.org.