State of Early Literacy
Strategy Update: August 2018
Early literacy has long been one of the Rogers Family Foundation’s strategic areas of focus for our Oakland education strategy. When CEO Brian Rogers and community partners first convened the Oakland Literacy Coalition in 2008, it galvanized the field of literacy providers to better align our collective efforts in service of improving reading proficiency for all Oakland students. Though there has been some measured improvement, the work is far from over. In 2016, the Foundation’s 2020 Strategic Plan restated the importance of early literacy as one of our primary goals, while also ushering in significant changes: 1) the launch of the Oakland Literacy Coalition as an independent nonprofit organization; and 2) deepened multi-year commitments to fewer organizations more closely aligned to the K-3 reading intervention space. Now a decade after the initial founding of the Oakland Literacy Coalition and midway through the Foundation’s current strategy, 2018 serves as a natural reflection point for assessing the effectiveness of the strategy and evaluating progress to date toward the citywide goal of 85% of students reading proficiently by the end of third grade.¹

The Foundation’s Oakland Education Strategy 2020 goal for early literacy also specifically calls for improving the reading proficiency of a minimum of 2,500 K-3 public school students. As of the 2016-17 school year, literacy grantees collectively served over 2,600 students. At the same time, systemic barriers still prevent the vast majority of students furthest from opportunity from reaching proficiency by the end of third grade. Despite significant investment, both in terms of financial resources and time from committed educators and community partners, progress towards the shared 85% goal has been only incrementally positive. Preliminary Spring 2018 data show that roughly 48.4% of Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) third graders are reading at or above grade level as measured by the Reading Inventory (formerly known as the Scholastic Reading Inventory or SRI). That is only up 2.0 percentage points over Spring 2017, which was a .1 percentage point increase from Spring 2016. We’ve only seen Reading Inventory proficiency grow by roughly five percentage points in the last 4 years. At this rate, it will take a minimum of 25 years to reach our collective 85% goal. Oakland students deserve better.

¹ When the Foundation adopted its Oakland Education Strategy 2020, no common assessment system existed following the state’s transition away from the California Standards Tests. In alignment with Oakland Reads 2020, the Oakland Unified School District, and the Mayor’s Office, the Foundation selected the Reading Inventory (formerly known as the Scholastic Reading Inventory or SRI) as its reading proficiency benchmark as it was the only consistently and widely administered assessment at the time. While the Foundation continues to track and report on progress towards 85% reading proficiency as measured by the Reading Inventory, we know that we are missing data for roughly one quarter of Oakland third grade public students that attend charter schools throughout the city. In 2017, the state adopted the Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBAC), part of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress system, which tracks proficiency in English Language Arts and Math for all California public schools. With this comprehensive data set, the Foundation also now tracks progress towards reading proficiency by looking at the SBAC ELA Reading Claim for all Oakland schools and students.
In the face of persistent challenges, a broad set of dedicated educators and community partners have been working to be thoughtful and collaborative in addressing this crisis. **We have made exciting and unprecedented progress on our capacity to collect, analyze, and use data to drive decision-making.** As a result of two ongoing data projects in particular (see more on the OUSD Data Share and LitMap below), momentum has been building to more deeply understand programmatic impact on literacy assessment outcomes for students. Gathering comparative data and making decisions based on those results represented one of the driving factors behind the formation of the Oakland Literacy Coalition back in 2008. There is also renewed clarity and focus from our partners at OUSD - from Superintendent Dr. Kyla Johnson-Trammell and an extremely dedicated English Language Arts (ELA) team - on the paramount importance of supporting high quality literacy professional development for teachers and school leaders. In particular, the ELA team is focused on ways to measure the extent to which schools and teachers are implementing a **Balanced Approach to Literacy** initiative and supporting early foundational skills in struggling readers. OUSD’s Research, Assessment and Data team has compiled impressive new tools and dashboards looking at **pre-school experience** and **school readiness** and has been instrumental in supporting the field’s capacity to access and meaningfully use data. Our literacy nonprofit partners have rallied around this newfound access and have proven time and again that their focus is on keeping students at the center of their work. Their participation in these projects and ongoing commitment to serving Oakland’s students has laid the groundwork for the much-needed and nuanced conversation on what is and is not working to get students to reach reading proficiency. This has all led to meaningful and transparent dialogue facilitated by the Oakland Literacy Coalition on the best way to utilize existing community resources to supplement, but not replace classroom instruction, which is where students spend the majority of their reading instruction time.

In Oakland, we have an inverted RTI (Response to Intervention) model, whereby far more than 20% of students need additional support beyond classroom instruction and far fewer than 80% of students are reading proficiently. This means that historically, we as a system have relied heavily on external intervention programs and organizations largely driven by community volunteers to accelerate student reading growth. This has likely led to unrealistic expectations of community partner impact on literacy scores. While intervention programs are a significant and necessary component of our collective efforts to accelerate student reading growth, they cannot do it alone. **Even high performing evidence-based intervention programs will only be truly effective in schools that have high quality Tier 1 classroom instruction.** For these reasons, we are glad to see OUSD committing to professional development of teachers in an effort to support effective and consistent strategies inside the classroom, and communicating that focus to the field of literacy providers. The Foundation remains committed and best positioned to continue to support high quality early literacy programs grounded in academic best practices, but with right-sized expectations of impact. Central to this work around measuring impact, classroom alignment, and partner collaboration, is the Oakland Literacy Coalition.
THE OAKLAND LITERACY COALITION

Now approaching its third year as a fully operational and independent nonprofit organization, the Oakland Literacy Coalition has spearheaded a number of projects that have supported increased coordination and transparency within the literacy provider field. While the Foundation and the Coalition continue to work in close alignment, this new structure has been pivotal in enabling both of our organizations to take on separate roles and approaches in how we support the field. Much as we hoped, the Coalition has also re-anchored the early literacy proficiency goal among community partners, and has brought capacity building opportunities to its membership. In a recent survey, 86% of organizations report that their participation in the Coalition has increased their capacity to provide effective and impactful literacy programming.²

MEASURING IMPACT

Organizations that provide literacy interventions typically have their own curriculum and corresponding assessments and while students participating in their programs may be showing growth by those measures, there was no way to verify whether those students were also growing when assessed by the main early literacy measures OUSD uses: Fountas & Pinnell (F&P), Reading Inventory, and Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC).³ Two additional factors exacerbate this challenge: 1) responses from a 2017 partner survey showed that 33 literacy organizations were using 25 different assessments to benchmark their programs; and 2) even when looking at OUSD’s three main measures for third grade reading proficiency, test scores for the same group of third graders over three school years vary significantly. Though the assessments are admittedly measuring different skills, this makes the messaging to partners around programmatic and assessment alignment challenging. It also means that measuring and reporting on the percentage of students served by literacy grantees that accelerate their rate of learning is difficult to accurately and consistently measure. There is also work to be done to clarify messaging to partners who serve students across all Oakland schools that may be using different curriculum and assessments than OUSD.

The Coalition stands well-positioned to serve as the entity that bridges messaging and alignment primarily between departments at OUSD and community partners. Over the past year, the Coalition has taken the lead in coordinating two significant data projects that have provided much needed context and clarity in support of strengthening the service provider field.

- The OUSD Data Share began as a pilot project in the 2014-15 school year between four literacy community partners and OUSD to better understand how programs were contributing to accelerating students’ reading growth as measured by District assessments. Now approaching its fifth consecutive year, the data share has grown to include more than seven literacy organizations collectively serving over 3,100 students, encompassing a larger breadth of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The Coalition plays a critical role in coordinating the logistics of the data share as well as meaningfully debriefing the results with partners in a way that leads to actionable programmatic shifts to better serve students.

- LitMap was launched in 2017 as a joint project between the Coalition, OUSD, and the Foundation. It is an interactive data dashboard that maps literacy resources across Oakland, including information from Child Development Centers and is building towards including information from charter schools, in an attempt to begin to centralize literacy data from disparate systems. With literacy provider data and school enrollment and academic information readily available and consistently updated, LitMap is an invaluable tool that will continue to be developed and refined to help school leaders and organizations make informed decisions and fully utilize existing community resources.

² From the Oakland Literacy Coalition’s 2016-17 grant report, referenced with permission, representing responses from organizations that identified themselves as literacy service providers.

³ Brief explanations of each assessment and the data for the 2014-15 to 2016-17 school years to highlight disparity can be found here.
CLASSROOM ALIGNMENT

With this newfound access to data, the next iteration of these projects will focus on how to better align intervention programs with classroom instruction and ensure that students have access to the interventions most likely to serve them best. Some exciting opportunities exist for the Coalition to facilitate and host joint professional learning and trainings between school leaders, teachers, and partners. These trainings would offer opportunities to share book lists and to provide additional context and technical assistance around early literacy best practices. One such training is already scheduled to take place this fall so that literacy providers can receive high quality Reading Fundamentals professional development with district and charter educators. Community partners also add tremendous value by providing students with additional opportunities to engage with caring adults. By creating space and trust for community partners to more effectively complement classroom instruction, the field is better equipped to reinforce core academic concepts while providing social and emotional support outside the classroom.

PARTNER COLLABORATION

With the Coalition’s commitment to learn, collaborate, and champion early literacy in the community, it continues to play a vital role in spearheading the Oakland Reads campaign to elevate the importance of reading proficiently by the end of third grade and remains active at multiple citywide tables such as the Oakland Starting Smart and Strong Initiative and the Oakland Summer Learning Network. Additionally, since the 2016-17 school year, its mini grants program has awarded over $121,607 to organizations and schools to host Family Reading Celebrations and Summer Reading events and has distributed over 18,800 books in service of building awareness of early literacy and fostering literacy-rich environments. The Coalition’s quarterly meetings have also grown to share pertinent news and reports, and created space for all organizations in early education to collaborate and hear updates from schools, researchers, and each other. These meetings are routinely attended by 40 or more attendees representing upwards of 20 organizations ranging from literacy providers, the Oakland Public Library, faith-based organizations, the Oakland Housing Authority, and many others. Further, the newly launched Member Network offers additional benefits including access to pro-bono consulting services for nonprofits, funder engagement, and specialized professional development opportunities. More recently, Funder Dialogues facilitated by the Coalition for its members have paved the way for authentic and transparent conversations on funder-grantee power dynamics and desired shifts to create better partnerships.

* From the Oakland Literacy Coalition’s 2016-17 grant report, referenced with permission, which includes the distribution of 3,500 books donated by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt to partners that work with predominantly low income families of young children.
WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE FOUNDATION

As the Coalition’s capacity to more broadly serve the field continues to expand, the Foundation has adapted its early literacy grantmaking priorities even further in service of supporting evidence-based reading interventions and supports for early elementary students and educators. While we know that supporting students and families of children 0-8 is of paramount importance and takes many forms, the Foundation’s resources are best positioned to specifically support organizations with Oakland programs that meet the following baseline criteria, which include but are not limited to:

- Is a school based reading intervention
- Has a small group or one-on-one programmatic model
- Serves public school students in grades K-3
- Has a system for tracking students participating in the program
- Takes place during out-of-school time or has a push-in/pull-out model that doesn’t take a student away from instructional classroom time
- Has programmatic content aligned to one of the main literacy assessments used by schools (F&P, Reading Inventory, SBAC, Developmental Reading Assessment, etc.)
- Engages in Oakland Literacy Coalition programming
- Participates in the OUSD Data Share
- Annually updates organization information in LitMap

As the Foundation reflects broadly on the Oakland education landscape, our team recognizes that strengthening the system to focus on improvements in classroom instruction is critical to getting to reading proficiency and ultimately to quality. In alignment with other Foundation initiatives, we have supported professional development opportunities for elementary school leaders and teachers to refocus energy and improve quality in implementing the adopted curriculum in the classroom. While the Foundation will continue to partner with high quality programs providing evidence-based reading interventions, supporting classroom alignment and teacher capacity and development across initiatives are areas for continued growth.

With the start of the 2018-19 school year, the Rogers Family Foundation team looks forward to continuing to collaborate with our grantees and community partners in support of students furthest from opportunity to reach reading proficiency. We know that there are many strategies and approaches to reaching this collective goal and we are fortunate to have so many talented and passionate educators and organizations with which to partner. At the same time, the Foundation has finite funding for reading interventions and we know that far too many children are reading below grade level. In an effort to be more strategic and incisive, some areas of focus for the upcoming year include:

- Digging more deeply into ongoing data projects and surfacing key insights that can help shift existing programming to better serve students. This could include:
  - Potentially looking at increasing dosage, or the length or frequency with which students receive intervention, and its effect on growing literacy scores.
  - Working with on-site partner coordinators to bridge communication between wrap-around service providers to be adaptive and responsive to student needs.
  - Supporting the use of technology to help teachers and partners communicate about the needs of their students.
- Examining financial sustainability and cost transparency field-wide. This could include:
  - Looking at programmatic models, costs, students and sites served, and other data to better allocate and maximize our resources so more students can have access to high quality and personalized literacy support.
  - Engaging other funders to streamline our grantmaking application and reporting process to ease the burden on grantees, and collaboratively set common outcomes for the field.
This document is not meant to be a comprehensive totality of early literacy in Oakland, but serves as a preamble for the Foundation to reflect and refresh our strategic focus. It was prepared with input from community partners including grantees, funding partners, other early education networks, and peers. As always, we value community partnership and feedback. Please reach out to Ryana S. Barbosa, Literacy Program Officer (rbarbosa@rogersfoundation.org), with questions, comments, suggestions, and more to see how we can work better together.