



# Public Partners for Early Literacy: Library-School Partnerships Closing Opportunity Gaps

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The **Urban Libraries Council (ULC)** is the premier membership organization of North America's leading public library systems. ULC is deeply invested in identifying and advancing the ways in which public libraries contribute to improving education outcomes for all learners. With the help of its members, ULC publishes briefs and reports, presents webinars and workshops, convenes key local and national leaders, and initiates projects that advance libraries' work in education and lifelong learning, among other critical areas. Visit [www.urbanlibraries.org](http://www.urbanlibraries.org) to learn more.

The **Council of the Great City Schools** brings together the nation's largest urban public school systems in a coalition dedicated to the improvement of education for children in the inner cities. The Council and its member school districts work to help our school children meet the highest standards and become successful and productive members of society. Visit [www.cgcs.org](http://www.cgcs.org) to learn more.

The **Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)** is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 123,000 libraries and 35,000 museums. Our mission is to inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement. Our grant making, policy development, and research help libraries and museums deliver valuable services that make it possible for communities and individuals to thrive. Visit [www.ims.gov](http://www.ims.gov) to learn more.

The **Campaign for Grade-Level Reading** is a collaborative effort by foundations, nonprofit partners, business leaders, government agencies, states, and communities across the nation to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship. The Campaign focuses on an important predictor of school success and high school graduation—grade-level reading by the end of third grade. Visit [www.gradelevelreading.net](http://www.gradelevelreading.net) to learn more.

## PROJECT TEAM

**Emily Samose**  
Director, Education and Learning Initiatives,  
Urban Libraries Council

**Christine Becker**  
Consultant, Urban Libraries Council

**Susan Benton**  
President and CEO, Urban Libraries Council

**Michael Casserly**  
Executive Director,  
Council of the Great City Schools

**Robin Hall**  
Director of Language Arts and Literacy,  
Council of the Great City Schools

**Michell Yorkman**  
Special Projects Manager, Council of the  
Great City Schools

**Ron Fairchild**  
Director, GLR Support Center,  
Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

## ABOUT

This call-to-action publication results from a National Forum on Closing the Opportunity Gap for Early Readers, led by the Urban Libraries Council in partnership with the Council of the Great City Schools, and made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Grant Number: LG-83-16-0068-16). With the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading involved as a strategic advisor, the national forum focused on identifying areas of opportunity, gaps in knowledge, and strategic library-school-community partnerships that lead to increased access to public library learning opportunities for low-income, at-risk, K-3rd grade students to improve their reading proficiency. The initiative included a national field scan and a convening of 24 expert stakeholders, including city and county library leaders; school district leaders; and early literacy, family learning, and community school network leaders. The convening agenda and list of participants are provided in the appendices to this report.

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## I. A CALL TO ACTION

Despite widespread agreement on the importance of grade-level reading proficiency as a key to academic, economic, and life success, many children are still failing to reach the essential third-grade reading benchmark. The risk is particularly acute for low-income children. Only 18 percent of low-income fourth-graders scored at or above proficient on the 2015 National Assessment of Education Progress, up only one percentage point from 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Community anchor institutions must do more to help low-income children become proficient readers and avoid the bleak prognosis suggested by grade-level reading data.<sup>2</sup>

Public libraries are vital resources in children's learning journeys, bringing a wealth of expertise and resources that provide a lifeline for struggling young readers. When public libraries and school systems intentionally collaborate, they are able to deliver seamless and supportive learning experiences for children most in need of assistance to achieve reading proficiency.

Public Partners for Early Literacy calls upon leaders of public library systems and school systems to strategically, proactively, and thoughtfully work together to expand access to library literacy resources that increase the chances of more low-income K-3rd graders becoming proficient readers. Based on knowledge gained from a field scan and a discussion of thought leaders, the report provides a framework for strengthening and leveraging library-school-community partnerships that help all children become proficient in reading, which will enable them to enjoy the promise of a bright and successful future.

## II. WHY A NATIONAL FORUM ON CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP?

Recognizing both the urgency of the need and the potential impact of library-school partnerships, the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) initiated a partnership with the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), to convene a National Forum on Closing the Opportunity Gap for Early Readers.

The forum provided a first-time opportunity to weave together three strands of current practice related to grade-level reading proficiency:

The urgency of focusing on kindergarten through third grade as pivotal years for helping struggling readers become proficient before they enter the fourth grade, when they transition from learning to read to reading to learn.

The work of libraries as education leaders with unique capacities to support low-income young readers in ways that complement and enhance traditional classroom learning.

The benefits of schools and libraries working together in a more seamless and intentional way to help at-risk students achieve the critical third-grade reading benchmark.

On December 1-2, 2016, a group of thought leaders representing public school systems, public libraries, and national education networks convened in Washington, DC, to share perspectives on issues related to improving the reading proficiency of low-income K-3rd grade students, including:

- ▶ How schools identify students most in need of reading support
- ▶ Library programs designed to meet the needs of struggling readers
- ▶ What schools and libraries need from each other to achieve their shared goal of improving reading proficiency
- ▶ Strategies for building and sustaining strong school-library partnerships to help struggling low-income readers

- ▶ Challenges libraries face in reaching and engaging struggling readers
- ▶ Areas for further research, discussion, and action

To inform the discussion of these issues and the continuing work, ULC and CGCS conducted a national field scan to identify promising programs, partnership approaches, and challenges in improving reading among K-3rd grade low-income students. The field scan consisted of a focus group of CGCS school district leaders and a survey of ULC member libraries.

The national forum was also informed by the Leaders Library Card Challenge, an initiative led by ULC in partnership with IMLS. Launched in 2015 by President Obama as part of his ConnectED Initiative, the Leaders Library Card Challenge grew out of a belief that more intentional collaboration among chief elected officials, school superintendents, and library executives could improve education outcomes for all students, begin to close opportunity and achievement gaps, and create a framework for an integrated approach to education—starting by ensuring that all school children have library cards and know how to use them to access library learning resources.

## Forum Assumptions

The following assumptions guided the work of the National Forum on Closing the Opportunity Gap for Early Readers and development of this call-to-action paper.

- ▶ **Third-grade reading proficiency really matters:** Research shows that third-grade reading proficiency is the most important predictor of high school graduation. Children who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school or fail to graduate, which can lead to a lifetime of social and economic disadvantages.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ **Kindergarten through third grade are make-or-break years for low-income readers who are struggling:** Since many children from low-income families start kindergarten about six months behind their middle-class peers,<sup>4</sup> kindergarten through third grade is a critical time for making up ground and building reading skills to be ready for fourth grade.<sup>5</sup> Several states have enacted automatic retention policies that hold back children who don't achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade. There's no time to lose in the work toward third-grade reading proficiency, and schools need the support of community partners that provide complementary literacy activities. Making the most of the 7,800 hours children spend out of school each year, compared to 900 hours in school, is essential to improving reading proficiency for all K-3rd grade students—particularly for struggling low-income readers.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ **Low-income children face a tough road to academic success:** In a 2013 article, Prudence Carter described three different paths to academic success based on income levels. Children from the wealthiest families “board an elevator that speeds them to academic success,” while children from middle-class families take “smoothly operating escalators toward academic achievement goals,” Carter wrote. In contrast, children from poor or lower-income families “stare up a steep stairwell, often with broken steps and no hand rails.”<sup>7</sup> Children from low-income communities face disadvantages that contribute to poor education outcomes, including parents with limited reading or English language skills and limited time to address their children's learning needs; absence of books at home; and day-to-day life challenges such as lack of reliable transportation and insecurities in food, housing, and health care.
- ▶ **Public libraries address both the academic and social needs of low-income early readers and their families:** From early childhood education through two-generation and adult learning, libraries are essential education institutions and leaders in community-based education. They help level the playing field for low-income children and their families by providing learning opportunities and resources such as technology tools that are otherwise not available. Perhaps most important, libraries have significant flexibility in responding to the unique needs of struggling, low-income readers by providing vital services such as meals and health resources that help overcome daily life obstacles and put improved reading proficiency in reach.

- ▶ **Public libraries continue to face challenges in reaching and engaging low-income children:** A 2013 IMLS analysis found that only 36 percent of low-income kindergarten children visited libraries during that critical learning year, and three out of five first-graders living at or below the poverty line did not have library cards.<sup>8</sup> More recently, 26 percent of the libraries who responded to the ULC field scan survey reported that low-income families are not regular library users and nearly 75 percent of respondents said transportation from low-income neighborhoods to the library is a significant barrier to engaging children in need. Libraries recognize that connecting low-income children with valuable library learning resources requires more proactive outreach, including working with teachers to identify children who need reading assistance and bringing library programs and resources to where children and their families spend time, such as schools, daycare and community centers, parks, and playgrounds.
- ▶ **When libraries and schools work together, struggling readers and their families benefit:** Working together, libraries and schools can ensure that all K-3rd readers have access to valuable library learning resources and literacy activities to increase their chances of entering fourth grade as proficient readers. In addition, intentional library-school partnerships provide a more seamless connection between classroom and library learning for young readers and their families.

Building on these assumptions and the wisdom of the forum participants, this report provides a starting point for strengthening library-school partnerships to make the most of the critical kindergarten through third-grade learning years.

**“Just because a child is having a problem with reading does not mean they don’t have the intellectual capacity to learn reading. They just need the right support to enable them to gain those literacy skills.”**

–Robin Hall, Director of Language Arts and Literacy, Council of the Great Schools

## BY THE NUMBERS: SPOTLIGHT ON THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

- ▶ One in six children who are not reading proficiently by third grade fail to graduate from high school on time.
- ▶ Poor children who are not reading proficiently by third grade are three times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate from high school than those who have never been poor.
- ▶ More than a third of children whose families are poor, who live in a high-poverty neighborhood, and who have poor reading skills in their early grade levels fail to finish high school.
- ▶ Only 21 percent of poor children aged 3-6 years were able to recognize all 26 letters of the alphabet compared with 35 percent of children in the same age group living above poverty.
- ▶ Black and Hispanic children who are not reading proficiently in third grade are twice as likely as White children not to graduate from high school.
- ▶ Only 18 percent of low-income fourth-graders nationwide scored at or above proficient level on the 2015 NAEP scores.
- ▶ One in four children from low-income families enters kindergarten not ready to learn.
- ▶ More than three in five first-graders (62 percent) living below the poverty level did not have library cards, and only 36 percent of children with the lowest socioeconomic status visited libraries in their kindergarten year.<sup>9</sup>

# III. PUBLIC LIBRARIES SUPPORTING IMPROVED READING PROFICIENCY

Libraries bring a wealth of assets and expertise to meet community education needs. Their status as safe, trusted community hubs makes them particularly valuable resources for low-income students who need extra support to reach the critical third-grade reading benchmark. In addition, libraries look and feel different from schools, which can be a significant asset for some children who aren't successful in the classroom. When libraries leverage their flexible and comfortable environment and provide human resources (e.g., volunteers, tutors, coaches) to support reading improvement, struggling young students have the chance to make great gains.

“The biggest predictor of on-time high school graduation is whether children are reading proficiently by the end of third grade. Our challenge as library leaders is to find approaches and momentum that will turn kids into lifelong readers early in their learning lives.”

– Marie Jarry, Director, Youth and Family Services,  
Hartford Public Library

“There’s a value to being different from schools, particularly for students who are struggling in the classroom.”

– Jane Eastwood, Director,  
Saint Paul Public Library

Five key library education assets identified by ULC in its [Leadership Brief: Partners for Education](#)<sup>10</sup>

1. Because of their position as **safe, trusted, inclusive community hubs**, libraries are in touch with the changing education needs of the community.
2. Libraries are the only education institutions that **connect with individual learning needs from birth through senior years**.
3. Libraries know how to **use diverse education formats**, from one-on-one coaching to building high-tech skills. They keep abreast of changing learning models without abandoning approaches that are timeless.
4. Nobody does **personalized and customized learning** better than libraries. They meet individuals where they are and help them continue their learning progress.
5. Libraries are adept at **building partnerships to support education goals**. Libraries seek out and thrive on partnerships that broaden impact.

## *Six Ways Libraries Help Low-Income Children Become More Proficient Readers*

More than 82 percent of libraries that responded to the ULC field scan survey reported that they offer programs specifically for struggling, low-income readers. These programs and services draw on the library’s unique education assets and status as a community anchor institution to support improved reading proficiency for the most at-risk children and to help low-income families make productive use of out-of-school time and connect to valuable community resources that support improved education outcomes.

Libraries are supporting reading improvement among low-income K-3rd graders by:

### **1. Providing High-Quality Summer Learning Opportunities**

Summer learning is one of the most important ways libraries support struggling young readers. A Johns Hopkins University study found that up to two-thirds of the ninth-grade achievement gap could be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities in elementary school.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, research from the University of



Tennessee concluded that summer reading loss is the “basis for almost all of the rich/poor reading gap,” and eliminating that period of learning loss would have a significant impact on narrowing the achievement gap.<sup>12</sup>

To ensure that children most in need of support participate in summer learning, libraries get referrals from teachers and schools and do outreach in specific neighborhoods. Libraries also offer summer learning activities at locations where low-income children already spend time, such as childcare facilities, public housing sites, and Title I schools serving high populations of low-income students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

“Public libraries are anchors of our communities and serve everyone, particularly low-income and traditionally underserved populations. By leveraging their resources and partnerships, libraries provide diverse summer learning programs and free meals while equipping parents to be their child’s best first teacher. Libraries are full partners in the education system, complementing classroom curriculum and offering customized learning opportunities that both engage learners and achieve real results in improving reading achievement.”

–Susan Benton, President and CEO,  
Urban Libraries Council

- ▶ **Richland Public Library’s** Project Summer Slide is a four-week, four-day-a-week summer camp for rising first- through third-grade children held at a local elementary school that is also a summer food service site. Teachers lead literacy activities three days a week, and the library coordinates one-on-one tutoring and literacy enrichment on the fourth day.
- ▶ **New Haven Free Public Library** works with schools in their branch neighborhoods to identify struggling K-3rd grade readers to enroll in their READY for the Grade summer learning program. With support from the New Alliance Foundation, the library provides twice-a-week group tutoring sessions and once-a-week family nights with dinner and individual tutoring during a seven-week program.
- ▶ **Santa Clara County Library District’s** Power School is a six-week summer learning program offered at a school with a high concentration of low-income students. The program provides STEM-based learning and literacy activities to promote creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills in support of the Common Core curriculum.
- ▶ **Virginia Beach Public Library’s** Summer Slide Partnership Program focuses on bringing library learning activities, STEM, and literacy programming into Title I schools within the Virginia Beach City Public Schools District.

## 2. Supporting Family Learning

Children who are exposed to books, stories, and reading early in life and have parents and caregivers who are involved in their learning are more prepared to start school and more likely to graduate and achieve long-term success. Libraries have embraced the power of two-generation learning that fosters stronger family bonds, equips parents to support their children’s reading proficiency, encourages family engagement in school curriculum and activities, and helps build an at-home culture of reading. Research and experience have shown that “families with a rich reading culture—books and lots of talking about books—are more likely to raise successful readers.”<sup>13</sup>

- ▶ **Houston Public Library’s** Family Learning Involvement Program (FLIP) provides self-paced learning kits to at-risk families consisting of a book, a handout for parents with tips to make reading the book interactive and fun, and materials to extend the reading experience into hands-on activity. Kits are offered in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. FLIP kits are distributed at parks; public housing; grocery stores; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinics; and other locations that low-income families frequent. Parents reported that the FLIP kits helped them better understand their children’s reading needs and gave them ideas on how to support their child’s reading development and learning. Nearly 90 percent of families who used the FLIP kits reported that their children were reading more often.
- ▶ **San Mateo County Libraries** offers two-generation learning opportunities in underserved communities focusing on helping children meet the third-grade reading benchmark. In partnership with the National

Center for Families Learning (NCFL), the library engages Spanish-speaking families in weekly two-generation learning experiences to build English language skills, improve reading ability, and increase family leadership and community engagement.

### 3. Bringing Books and Learning Resources to Children, Families, and Schools

Children from low-income families are less likely to have books in their homes than their more affluent classmates, which leaves little room for choice about what to read during out-of-school time. Independent reading of self-selected books contributes to improved confidence, enjoyment, and proficiency. Significant reductions in or even elimination of school libraries because of tight budgets has exacerbated the book gap for children from low-income families. Public libraries are helping to address these gaps by ensuring that all children have library cards, providing books to children to build home libraries, and supplementing school libraries.

- ▶ **Hartford Public Library** opened branches in several public schools to serve students and the general public during regular library hours. Two branches located within local K-8 schools support library services for those schools as well as the high school and other nearby middle and elementary schools. Because most public schools in Hartford no longer have school libraries, branch libraries in schools fill an important student resource gap while also serving the public.
- ▶ **Pima County Public Library's** Reading Seed Kinder program combines twice-a-week one-on-one reading sessions for 67 kindergarten students at one elementary school with distribution of free books. The goals of the program are to improve reading skills, nurture a love of reading, and build home libraries.
- ▶ Communities participating in the **Leaders Library Card Challenge** are working collaboratively to ensure that all K-12 students have library cards, are familiar with the resources available to them at their public libraries, and regularly use those resources. When teachers know that every student, regardless of socioeconomic status, has a library card, they are able to use library resources in the classroom, increase awareness of what the library offers, and make the library part of the learning process both in the classroom and after school. During the first year of the challenge, 60 participating communities issued new library cards to more than one million children. Many of those cards were newly issued electronic cards, giving students 24/7 access to library resources using their student IDs.

### 4. Delivering Personalized Learning

A 2014 [Education Week article](#) highlighted the growing importance of personalized learning to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and the power of technology to support that goal.<sup>14</sup> Public libraries are experts in personalized learning, which is particularly effective in helping struggling readers who haven't succeeded in traditional classroom settings. Libraries leverage their program flexibility to meet each student's learning needs, using one-on-one tutoring, technology resources, and small-group read-aloud sessions that focus on the fundamentals of literacy development—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension.

- ▶ **Cuyahoga County Public Library's** 1-2-3 Read program provides afterschool one-on-one and small group literacy development for 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-grade students who are identified by their school district as at risk of not meeting the Ohio Third-Grade Reading Guarantee, the state's required benchmark for fourth-grade promotion. Children participate in two 75-minute sessions each week during the academic year. Cuyahoga's approach uses books, technology, learning tools, and multiple assessments to track progress and make adjustments along the way.
- ▶ **Montgomery County Public Library's** Reading Buddies program pairs students identified by teachers as needing extra reading help with trained high school tutors. To encourage attendance, school and library staff work together to schedule convenient weekly two-hour reading sessions and provide round-trip bus

transportation from the school to the library. The program engages young readers from schools with high populations of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals. A snack is provided at the beginning of the session, and readers and their buddies select books to take home at the end of the session with guidance from children’s librarians.

- ▶ **New York Public Library’s** Literacy Leaders trains highschool students who need credits to graduate on time to become literacy tutors for struggling first- and second-graders. The tutors and young readers work together using the “RazKids” reading technology and engage in one-on-one reading sessions and large group read-alouds to strengthen reading fundamentals.

## 5. Nurturing a Love of Reading

When children read because they love to, not just because they have to, they are likely to become stronger readers. Nurturing reading enjoyment as a path to improved proficiency is where libraries excel. They incorporate games, incentives, rewards, and celebrations into many of their learning programs to keep children involved and engaged in their reading progress.

Educators and researchers have stressed that engaged readers are strategic, motivated, knowledge-driven, and socially interactive,<sup>15</sup> which builds reading confidence, competence, and comprehension over time. Library literacy programs provide a foundation for engaged reading by creating an environment that makes reading a more enjoyable activity, which is particularly important for struggling children who are often anxious and fearful about reading tasks.

- ▶ **Multnomah County Library’s** Books 2 U is an in-classroom program that delivers inspiration and books directly to classrooms where children are at great risk for low literacy. The program enlivens classrooms in the lowest-performing schools with “booktalks”—high energy presentations that introduce characters and stories so enticing that children can’t wait to get their hands on books to read outside the sessions.

“We encourage kids to love reading, and we inspire them to become lifelong readers.”

— Paula Kiely, Chief Librarian,  
Milwaukee Public Library

- ▶ **Saint Paul Public Library’s** Reading Together nurtures children’s pleasure and engagement in reading as a pathway to improved proficiency. The program connects struggling young readers with trained volunteer mentors for weekly, one-on-one coaching sessions in the library’s safe, comfortable environment to work on grade-level reading skills. To participate, students must be in grades 1 through 5, read just below grade level, and have a teacher’s signature verifying their need for reading assistance. Volunteers must be at least 16 years old, be proficient in reading and writing, and have an interest in helping children succeed.
- ▶ **Prince George’s County Memorial Library System’s** Boys Read program combines a reading-aloud program with a football game to create an enjoyable experience for struggling young readers. At weekly sessions led by a male librarian, young boys take turns reading aloud from their favorite titles and positively encourage each other. Student enthusiasm and return participation are two indicators of program success.
- ▶ **Free Public Library of Philadelphia** delivers book nooks to community gathering places such as barbershops, laundromats, and supermarkets to ensure that books are easily accessible in everyday places and to create fun read-together zones in locations where struggling readers and their families gather for other life activities.

## 6. Serving as an essential community convener

In addition to providing programs and services that directly support reading improvement for struggling, low-income children, libraries also serve an important leadership role in supporting reading achievement by convening community resources and connecting families and their children with local opportunities for learning and engagement, particularly during the summer. As community anchor institutions, libraries also help parents and childcare providers be more successful by offering trainings on how to conduct read-aloud sessions and other literacy development activities. Libraries also publish directories of summer learning opportunities throughout the community and build a community infrastructure to support reading and learning for low-income families.

- ▶ **Richmond Public Library** partners with community-based summer recreation programs to ensure that children in these programs have regular access to learning and enrichment activities. Library services include providing books and lesson plans so site teachers can offer daily reading programs, weekly coaching visits by library staff, pre- and post-assessments on word recognition and comprehension, and daily opportunities for children to select books at their reading level for independent or buddy reading.
- ▶ **Cedar Rapids Public Library** is enhancing the base of literacy programs that serve low-income children in the community through key partnerships with the local YMCA and the Kids on Course University. The collaborative program supports local work with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.
- ▶ **Broward County Library's** Summer Learning Program links services throughout the community, serving as the main summer resource for the county's public, charter, and private schools; community organizations; camps; and home and family-care programs. The library trains community staff from December to May, runs the community-wide summer learning program that includes tracking learning activities and incentives for all programs, and shares aggregate data with schools and other partners to measure progress and improve outcomes.

## *Obstacles to Greater Impact*

Libraries are helping to improve the reading proficiency of low-income children, drawing on their experience working with children, knowledge of children's literature, safe and welcoming environment, deep community connections, range of learning resources, and flexibility to respond to diverse needs. However, they face several obstacles to even greater impact. The most frequently mentioned obstacles are (1) reaching children most in need of assistance, (2) building staff expertise to teach reading, and (3) demonstrating that library programs contribute to improved reading proficiency. Strong library-school partnerships offer solutions to each of these challenges.

### **1. Reaching children most in need of reading assistance.**

A focused, proactive, and persistent outreach approach—more than flyers, presentations, and open invitations—is needed for libraries to reach struggling readers during the critical K-3rd grade learning window. The following partnership approaches have proven to be successful in meeting this challenge:

- ▶ **School connections and referrals.** When teachers, principals, reading specialists, and other school personnel are familiar with library literacy programs, they are better able to inform parents of struggling young readers about what's available at the library and refer them to specific programs and resources to support their children's path to reading proficiency.
- ▶ **Dedicated outreach staff.** Some libraries have dedicated outreach and community engagement staff whose purpose is to connect with schools, families, and struggling readers to understand their needs and help them overcome obstacles to participation. Outreach staff focus particularly on connecting with Title I schools, public housing residences, daycare and community centers, and homeless shelters.
- ▶ **Library programming in the community.** To reach low-income readers, libraries bring their programs and resources to children and their families in locations and at times that work best for them. Because lack of transportation is a major obstacle to library use by low-income families, making schools, community centers, and other accessible locations a home base for library literacy programs and resources increases the chance of active and sustained participation.

### **2. Building staff skill and expertise to teach reading**

While public libraries typically have one or more children's librarians on staff who are experts in children's literature, there is limited expertise among librarians on how to teach reading and develop literacy skills for struggling young readers. This limitation may impact the kinds of reading programs libraries are able to offer for low-income K-3rd

grade children. In fact, some libraries that responded to the ULC field scan survey said they do not offer any literacy programming exclusively for struggling low-income readers because they are not confident they have programming or staff expertise to meet their particular reading needs. Resources that libraries say would help them better serve low-income K-3rd grade students include:

- ▶ Increased understanding of new approaches to literacy development and the expectations for grade-level reading proficiency
- ▶ Training and professional development for library staff who work directly with struggling readers
- ▶ Joint professional development with school literacy experts to align approaches and increase understanding of current school practice and literacy research
- ▶ Hiring staff with education experience and expertise including people with classroom teaching experience

### **3. Demonstrating improved reading proficiency for participants in library programs.**

Although libraries regularly use parent surveys and interviews with program participants to gather anecdotal evidence of improved reading confidence and enjoyment, additional data and evidence is needed to demonstrate gains in reading achievement. The greatest potential for demonstrating how participation in library literacy programs improves reading proficiency comes from correlating library program participation with reading assessment results. This level of comparison and correlation requires data sharing between school districts and libraries, which can pose policy and technical challenges. Carefully crafted data-sharing agreements that provide policy guidance on protecting student privacy and outline technical responsibilities and procedures have helped libraries and schools make progress on data sharing to provide a foundation for measuring the impact of library literacy programs.

**“Libraries are an untapped resource – ready, willing, and able to be partners with school districts to improve literacy for K-3rd grade students.”**

**–Ruth Maegli, Chief Academic Officer,  
Milwaukee Public Schools**

## IV. MAXIMIZING IMPACT: LIBRARY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS FOR EARLY LITERACY SUCCESS

Partnerships between library and school systems support a comprehensive and seamless approach to helping struggling children become proficient readers. When school and library staff are in sync, children and parents/caregivers have more opportunity to make good use of out-of-school time to complement classroom work. In addition, strategic alignment between public libraries and school districts maximizes productive work to support at-risk students and minimizes redundancies and incompatible approaches.

Perhaps most important, close collaboration between schools and libraries can help struggling readers stay the course on their learning journeys as they experience the network of support from community anchor institutions.

Successful school-library partnerships are built on:

- ▶ Mutual respect and trust between key players in both the library and school systems
- ▶ An explicit commitment between the library director and school superintendent to work together around specifically defined goals
- ▶ Understanding of how each system works—how they are different and how they can complement each other
- ▶ Clear definition of roles and expectations in a formal agreement or memorandum of understanding to ensure that the commitment to work together continues even if personnel changes
- ▶ Shared language among library and school partners to facilitate understanding and collaboration
- ▶ Flexibility to adapt to changing needs, expectations, external pressures, and new challenges
- ▶ An open mind and a “get-it-done” attitude.<sup>16</sup>

### LESSONS FROM THE LEADERS LIBRARY CARD CHALLENGE

Key lessons about library-school partnerships that have emerged from the continuing work of the Leaders Library Card Challenge include:

- ▶ High-level collaboration involving the school superintendent and library director contributes to sustained attention to the learning needs of all children regardless of socioeconomic status.
- ▶ While a handshake and an ad-hoc commitment to work together is a good start, education partnerships thrive when there is a formal structure that defines specific roles and responsibilities to ensure that the collaboration extends beyond the leaders who shook hands.
- ▶ Even with a formal agreement, regular leader-to-leader and staff-to-staff communication is essential to sustain the relationship, focus on specific needs, respond to emerging challenges, and monitor progress.
- ▶ Establishing parameters and processes for data sharing remains a challenge best addressed in formal agreements that define the scope and purpose of shared data, responsibilities for providing and maintaining the agreed-upon data, and guidelines for maintaining the privacy of student records.
- ▶ Patience and perseverance are essential when building new partnerships. While all participating communities started with commitment letters signed by top leaders, moving from a letter to productive action took anywhere from several months to more than a year.

## Spotlights on Library-School Partnerships

Library-school partnerships to improve education outcomes take different forms depending on leadership priorities, community needs, and stakeholder interests. The following spotlights provide examples of several approaches to education partnerships.

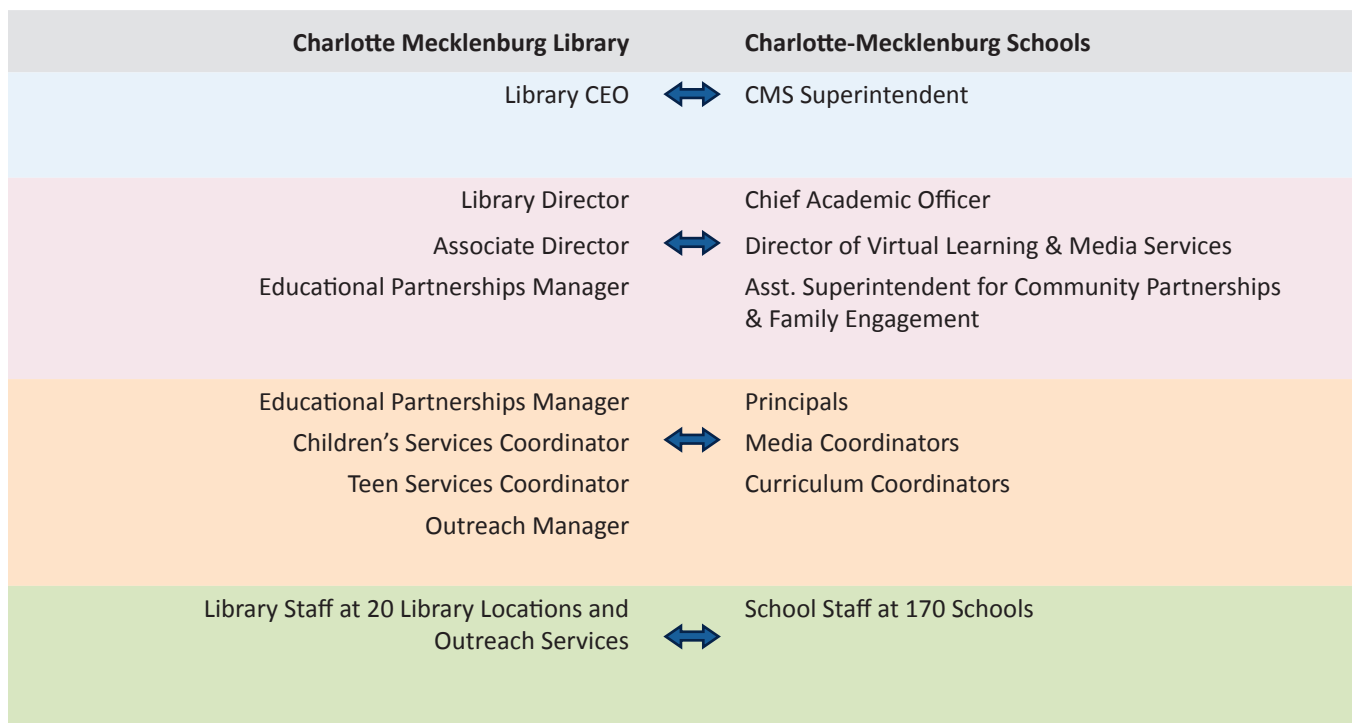
### Charlotte Mecklenburg, North Carolina

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (CML) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) have worked together over the past three years to build a partnership that started with a goal of ensuring that all public-school students have access to library resources using their student ID number as a library card number. To facilitate collaboration, CML and CMS created a series of formal agreements that defined and sharpened the working relationship over time, emphasizing the importance of communication, cooperation, and collaboration on all levels, at both organizations—from the library CEO and school superintendent to library staff at 20 branches and school staff at 170 schools.

We have moved from a cordial relationship between the library and school system, to a working partnership, to a one-year Memorandum of Understanding, to a five-year MOU. It is not an accident that our partnership is where it is today.

– Lee Keesler, Chief Executive Officer,  
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

### Key Players in the Library-School Partnership



The first CML-CMS Memorandum of Understanding in January 2014 created a framework for sharing aggregate test data and established a new Educational Partnerships Manager position at the library that has proven valuable in building, refining, and sustaining the working relationship. For example, the partnership manager met with instructional leadership teams from all schools to coordinate curriculum support through the library's new digital branch.

### **Hartford, Connecticut**

Hartford Public Library and Hartford Public Schools created a multidimensional partnership to improve education opportunities and outcomes for all students through a coherent system of resources, programming, and services. Named Boundless, the partnership is built around three action strategies:

- ▶ **Zone collaboration strategy** to create connections between branch libraries and surrounding schools to improve access to services
- ▶ **Partnership communication strategy** to increase awareness of library and school programs and resources among all community stakeholders and build regular communication channels to support constant improvement
- ▶ **Technology, resource, and access strategy** to leverage tools, systems, and resources to improve services and access to meet community learning needs.

*Boundless* began with a pilot program connecting one library branch with schools located in that “zone.” The pilot provided insight into how the public library and public school systems could collaborate more effectively to deepen learning opportunities for all children. Despite several leadership changes, the partnership infrastructure has provided a framework for continued collaboration.

To support reading proficiency, Boundless focuses on school readiness, library access for all children, programs for children and families, and special interventions to meet the needs of struggling K-3rd grade readers.

### **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

*Read by 4th* is a citywide effort managed by the Free Library of Philadelphia with a goal of doubling the number of children reading at grade level by 2020. As Philadelphia's Campaign for Grade-Level Reading initiative, the *Read by 4th* coalition includes 90 partners and ongoing outreach to identify new partners and resources.

Program strategies include:

1. Engaging parents in supporting their children's early language and reading skills
2. Promoting summer reading to prevent learning loss
3. Addressing barriers to active and regular school attendance
4. Ensuring students have access to expert reading instruction and quality resources

As the *Read by 4th* convener, the library is able to identify and address gaps. For example, the library identified mid-to-late August as a great time to launch its new *Back-to-School Jumpstart Camp*, giving children a late-summer boost before returning to school.



## V. TAKING ACTION TOGETHER: STRATEGIES FOR LIBRARIES AND SCHOOLS

Working together, libraries and schools can do more to increase the reading proficiency of struggling low-income young students. The following action strategies provide a framework for libraries and schools to strengthen their joint efforts to close the opportunity gap for low-income young readers.

**“We can’t do this work alone. The impetus for bringing libraries and schools together in urban areas is to get both pulling in the same direction to improve reading proficiency for all children.”**

**–Michael Casserly, Executive Director,  
Council of the Great City Schools**

### 1. Make the literacy needs of struggling, low-income K-3rd grade readers a priority for library programming

Libraries have a unique set of capacities and connections that make them ideal resources to overcome obstacles to reading success among low-income K-3rd grade students. When schools know that literacy programs for K-3rd grade readers are a library priority, they will be better able to match struggling readers with out-of-school opportunities at the library. Libraries can implement this action strategy by:

- ▶ Building staff capacity to teach reading, working in partnership with school literacy experts
- ▶ Rethinking how literacy programs for early readers are designed and delivered to address the specific needs of this audience
- ▶ Designing and offering literacy programs exclusively for struggling low-income, K-3rd grade readers
- ▶ Working directly with schools to identify struggling readers and tailoring programs to meet their specific needs
- ▶ Being a visible community leader on closing the opportunity gap for K-3rd grade readers

### 2. Provide literacy services outside the library, where children and families spend time

For struggling low-income young readers, bringing library programs, services, and resources to where they spend time with their families makes participation easier and increases the likelihood of sustained engagement. Strategies for building outward connections to provide literacy services outside the library include:

- ▶ Creating library outreach teams either by redesigning positions and work expectations or hiring dedicated outreach staff
- ▶ Working regularly with community organizations serving this audience such as public housing authorities, health clinics, daycare and community centers, and Boys and Girls Clubs to connect kids with library learning resources
- ▶ Collaborating with schools on parent outreach and engagement to demonstrate that the library and school are working together to improve their children’s reading proficiency, including periodically hosting joint informational sessions for parents at the library where parents can access technology and other useful resources.
- ▶ Connecting with local education networks, such as the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, to leverage complementary resources and support shared goals.

### 3. Include community resources for families as part of library K-3rd grade literacy programs

Through the library, parents can take advantage of a clearinghouse of resources to support their family well-being while children participate in tutoring and reading activities. Libraries also offer opportunities for parents to connect with other parents, build social capital with each other, and become more familiar with and engaged in

school learning, which will enable them to better support their children’s reading progress. Building a strong public library-public school partnership can help establish a family social services safety net to mitigate obstacles that prevent participation in literacy programs. Approaches to connecting community resources for families with literacy programs for children include:

- ▶ Serving meals or snacks to both children and their parents in conjunction with learning sessions
- ▶ Providing transportation from a convenient and familiar location, such as the neighborhood school parking lot to programs at library branches
- ▶ Scheduling meetings or briefings on community resources/nonprofits that support family well-being (e.g., day care opportunities, affordable housing, job support, health clinics) while children are participating in literacy programs
- ▶ Conducting parenting sessions in conjunction with reading programs

#### **4. Create consistent reading terminology and resources between schools and libraries**

Aligning school and library reading approaches, terminology, and resources contributes to a seamless connection for parents and caregivers who are trying to support their children’s progress toward grade-level reading proficiency. Creating successful connections between library resources and school curriculum requires:

- ▶ Understanding of school approaches to teaching and assessing children’s reading proficiency and the definitions of K-3rd grade reading levels
- ▶ Sharing of school curriculum and activities to help libraries coordinate programming and organize collections to support children at different reading levels
- ▶ Providing continuous library-school communications and ensuring alignment so that library resources complement classroom work and support reading progress during out-of-school time

When library staff understand the system used by schools to identify reading levels for young learners, they can organize complementary book collections, advise parents in choosing books based on the system, and help children select books that interest them and support their reading proficiency levels. For example, to make the school-library reading connection easy for parents and young readers, the New Haven Public Library created a chart and a labeling system for selected K-3rd grade books based on the Fountas and Pinnell assessment system used by New Haven Public Schools.

**When there is a shared language and shared understanding between libraries and schools about literacy training, libraries can be translators for parents.**

**– Jenny Bogoni, Executive Director,  
Read By 4th, Free Library of Philadelphia**

#### **5. Ensure partnership sustainability**

Experience and evidence show that library-school partnerships that start with a leadership level commitment to work together on a specific goal produce the best results. For participants in the Leaders Library Card Challenge, the focus on ensuring that all K-12 students had access to library resources provided a specific shared goal that sparked new partnerships that have grown beyond library cards. Some library and school leaders have found that starting small—collaborative work in one school or with one age group such as K-3rd grade struggling readers—is the most productive way to develop and test working relations, identify and resolve obstacles along the way, and learn from a pilot experience to provide a foundation for system-wide collaboration.

Initial action steps for creating or strengthening the school-library partnership to support struggling K-3rd grade readers include:

- ▶ Share this report with school and library leaders
- ▶ Convene key school and library leaders to discuss the report’s research, implications of this call to action within the context of the school district, and opportunities to collaborate to address the needs of struggling low-income K-3rd grade readers
- ▶ Identify obstacles that may have interfered with partnership success in the past and develop solutions
- ▶ Explore creation of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to define general parameters for an enhanced school-library partnership recognizing that the components of the partnership will evolve over time
- ▶ Agree on at least one action step to launch the collaborative effort and designate lead library and school staff to get the ball rolling
- ▶ Take the first step!

## VI. THE PATH FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND ACTION

This report provides a framework for strengthening library-school partnerships to increase opportunities for more low-income children to become proficient readers by the end of third grade, building on the individual efforts of libraries and schools. This report also initiated a much-needed conversation on the opportunities and challenges related to building and sustaining productive partnerships that lead to real learning outcomes. There is more work to be done to achieve greater impact. Recommended areas for further research and action include:

1. Develop a strategic guide for building sustainable library-school partnerships that moves from anecdotes and examples to recommended models and process maps including:
  - ▶ Essential components of partnership agreements
  - ▶ Glossary of shared language around education and learning
  - ▶ Communication processes
  - ▶ Key roles and responsibilities
2. Identify, document, and publish best practices and models for:
  - ▶ *Library staffing structures* that support external partnerships and collaborative programs for reaching and engaging struggling low-income K-3rd grade readers, including the skills and training needed to advance this work in public libraries
  - ▶ *Outreach strategies* that lead to increased engagement in library literacy services by the most disadvantaged children, focusing specifically on how schools and libraries can align their outreach efforts
  - ▶ *Quantitative and qualitative performance measures and systems* for demonstrating improved reading proficiency of student participants in library literacy programs

3. Explore models for and approaches to public libraries supporting and/or serving as school libraries in districts where budget cuts or shifting priorities have reduced or eliminated school libraries.
4. Investigate how library roles in supporting grade-level reading proficiency, partnership building, and outreach capacity can be better woven into library science graduate programs.
5. Explore how library participation in early literacy networks such as the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading supports their partnerships with schools and collaborative programming to improve the reading proficiency of low-income struggling readers in K-3rd grade.

## CONCLUSION

Fighting the good fight for kids means taking every step possible to ensure that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, have a good chance of entering fourth grade as proficient readers. When libraries and schools align their expertise and literacy work with kindergarten through third-grade low-income children, the goal of ensuring that all children achieve the third-grade reading benchmark is within reach. The examples in this report highlight the progressive work of libraries to support improved reading proficiency for low-income children and the possibilities that emerge from sustained library-school collaboration. The recommendations and call to action provide a path forward to continued progress on this urgent need.

The challenges are significant, but not insurmountable. And there's no time to waste.

**“We should reflect periodically on how we are doing compared to 20 years ago, pat ourselves on the back as we make progress, and keep fighting the good fight for our kids.”**

**– Brian Schultz, Chief Academic Officer,  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools**

## VII. APPENDICES

### *APPENDIX A: Forum Agenda*

#### **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2016**

Welcome and Plans for Our Time Together

Introductions

ULC Field Scan Review: Programs, Partnerships, and Key Challenges

How Struggling K-3 Readers Are Identified and What They Most Need to Improve

- ▶ Milwaukee Public Schools

Key Challenges for Libraries Reaching and Serving Low-income, Struggling Readers

- ▶ Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

Wrap-up, Key Takeaways, and Reflections

Networking Dinner

#### **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2016**

Day 1 Recap, Reflections, and Plans for Today

Library-School Partnerships and Collaborative Early Reading Programs

- ▶ St. Paul, Minn.
- ▶ Philadelphia, Penn.
- ▶ Hartford, Conn.

Successes and Challenges: Partnering to Improve K-3rd Reading Achievement

Lunch

Action Steps and Recommended Strategies

Wrap-up, Key Takeaways, and Final Recommendations



## APPENDIX B: Forum Participants

### **Christine Becker**

Consultant  
Urban Libraries Council

### **Jenny Bogoni**

Executive Director, Read! By 4th  
Free Library of Philadelphia

### **Michael Casserly**

Executive Director  
Council of the Great City Schools

### **Jane Eastwood**

Director  
Saint Paul Public Library

### **Robin Hall**

Director of Language Arts and Literacy  
Council of the Great City Schools

### **Keanne Henry**

Vice President  
AARP Foundation Experience Corps

### **Rodney Johnson**

Director, Early Literacy  
School District of Philadelphia

### **Paula Kiely**

City Librarian  
Milwaukee Public Library

### **Hans Ott**

Assistant Superintendent, Teaching and Learning  
Saint Paul Public Schools

### **Mary Kingston Roche**

Director of Public Policy  
Coalition for Community Schools

### **Emily Samose**

Director, Education and Learning Initiatives  
Urban Libraries Council

### **Jennifer Smith**

Senior Director, Curriculum and Instruction  
Milwaukee Public Schools

### **Susan Benton**

President & CEO  
Urban Libraries Council

### **Tim Carrigan**

Senior Program Officer, Library Services  
Institute of Museum and Library Services

### **Joshua Cramer**

Vice President  
National Center for Families Learning

### **Ron Fairchild**

Director, Network Community Support Center  
Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

### **Parker Hamilton**

Director  
Montgomery County Public Libraries

### **Marie Jarry**

Director, Youth and Family Services  
Hartford Public Library

### **Lee Kessler**

Chief Executive Officer  
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

### **Ruth Maegli**

Chief Academic Officer  
Milwaukee Public Schools

### **Michelle Puhlick**

Executive Director of Policy and Innovation  
Hartford Public Schools

### **Ramiro Salazar**

Library Director  
San Antonio Public Library

### **Brian Schultz**

Chief Academic Officer  
Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools

### **Michell Yorkman**

Special Projects Manager  
Council of the Great City Schools





## VIII. NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), “The Nation’s Report Card, 2015.” The Nation’s Report Card, [https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_2015/#reading?grade=4](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/#reading?grade=4).
- <sup>2</sup> See particularly Donald Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation Rates* (Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson. “Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap,” *American Sociological Review* 72, no.2 (2007), 167-180. doi:10.1177/000312240707200202.
- <sup>5</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures. *Third Grade Retention Legislation*, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/third-grade-reading-legislation.aspx>.
- <sup>6</sup> Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (Seventh edition) (New York: Penguin Group, 2013).
- <sup>7</sup> Prudence Carter, *It’s the Opportunity Gap, Stupid* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, May 15, 2013), <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/blog/entry/793>.
- <sup>8</sup> Deanne W. Swan et al., *Public Libraries in the United States Survey: Fiscal Year 2011 (IMLS-2014-PLS-01)* (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2014).
- <sup>9</sup> Compiled from Hernandez, 2012; Swan, 2013; J. B. Pritzker, Jeffrey L. Bradach, and Katherine Kaufmann, *Achieving Kindergarten Readiness for All Our Children: A Funder’s Guide to Early Childhood Development for Birth to Five* (Chicago: Pritzger Family Foundation, 2015); NAEP, 2015.
- <sup>10</sup> *Leadership Brief: Partners for Education* (Washington, DC: Urban Libraries Council, 2015)
- <sup>11</sup> Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson, “Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap.”
- <sup>12</sup> Richard L. Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen, *Summer Reading Loss is the Basis of Almost all the Rich/Poor Reading Gap* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 2016).
- <sup>13</sup> Lois Bridges, *The Joy and Power of Reading: A Summary of Research and Expert Opinion* (New York: Scholastic Inc, 2015), [www.scholastic.com/worldofpossible/sites/default/files/Research\\_Compendum\\_0.pdf](http://www.scholastic.com/worldofpossible/sites/default/files/Research_Compendum_0.pdf).
- <sup>14</sup> Cavanagh, Sean, “What is ‘Personalized Learning’? Educators Seek Clarity,” *Education Week* (October 20, 2014).
- <sup>15</sup> For more information about engaged reading, see University of Maryland, *Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland), [www.cori.umd.edu/research-projects/reading-engagement-project/overview.php](http://www.cori.umd.edu/research-projects/reading-engagement-project/overview.php).
- <sup>16</sup> Compiled from the National Forum on Closing the Opportunity Gap for Early Readers discussion and field scan and *Stepping Up to the ConnectED Library Challenge: A Call to Action* (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2016).





1333 H Street NW, Suite 1000 West  
Washington, DC 20005

202-750-8650

[UrbanLibraries.org](http://UrbanLibraries.org)