**THE LITERACY COOPERATIVE 2020 POLICY AGENDA**

The Literacy Cooperative policy agenda seeks to **elevate the voices of our partners, board, and other stakeholders** to bridge gaps in the education continuum and improve access to and delivery of quality literacy services in Greater Cleveland. The Literacy Cooperative works to ensure that policies and practices are informed by significant research available about the individual and collective benefits that accrue when individuals have access to high-quality literacy education. The policy agenda has been developed based on our community’s current needs for early literacy, two-generational practices/parent engagement, and adult education/career pathways. By incentivizing and supporting high-quality literacy programs—and their connections to other resources and supports—we can promote best practices, improve innovation in the field, and blend funding streams to improve outcomes. The Literacy Cooperative is recommending that the local, state, and national policymakers and stakeholders take the following action:

1. **Advance early literacy education:**

Investing in the right conditions for early childhood education programs have proven to be more effective and less costly than providing the necessary interventions at a later age. In fact, research found that for every dollar invested in early childhood education, a community prevents $14 spent on otherwise unnecessary costs which might be spent on extra academic supports or in-school interventions. The best time to maximize the impact of investments is between birth and the age of three. This period is when the foundation is laid of cognitive and character skills needed in school, health, career, and relationships. The gains of early childhood learning continue past pre-K—students who test ready on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) are twice as likely to read at grade level in the following years. Further along the early reading continuum, we know that third grade reading is a strong predictor of future academic success, with those reading at grade level on track to graduate. However, despite data-driven support for investing in high-quality early childhood literacy and education programs, providers often face challenges in both achieving the high-quality designation and expanding capacity due to lack of state and local funding. The DeWine Administration has acknowledged that “Just 41 percent of children in Ohio arrive at kindergarten with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in school” and worked to address this challenge by developing a Strategic Plan for Education and other recommendations that elevate the importance of home visits, prioritize partnerships with families, and encourage ongoing professional development for staff. Further, Governor DeWine’s Administration has taken steps to better integrate Step Up to Quality (SUTQ) across agencies and programs by requiring providers who receive funding from ODJFS to adhere to SUTQ standards and by creating the Governor’s Children’s Initiative to “Improve communication and coordination across all state agencies that provide services to Ohio’s Children.” Finally, by investing $5 million into Ohio’s Dolly Parton’s Imagination Libraries, Governor DeWine has ensured there will be “a matching fund for all the Imagination Libraries across the state, doubling the money for the current 54 Ohio affiliates of the program.” We applaud these advancements and recommend policymakers:

* 1. Continue to prioritize and fully fund high-quality early childhood education at scale, regardless of setting (i.e., center-based, school-based, etc.) and improve wages of child development associates.
  2. Ensure that all families can choose among options that meet high-quality standards and afford the early learning setting that is right for them.
  3. Dynamically and purposely reach out to and engage diverse groups of early childhood educators as funders in developing and implementing state and district plans.
  4. Highlight the success of Dolly Parton’s Imagination Libraries in Cuyahoga County to offer examples of ways to expand or bring national best practices for access to books beginning at birth.

1. **Support two-generational practices and encourage parent engagement in early education:**

Many different approaches have been tried to help families overcome structural barriers to poverty. Some have targeted adults and others have focused on the next generation. However, these bifurcated approaches have generally not had the impact sought. Research shows that children from low income households have trouble meeting the same developmental milestones as their peers from a higher socioeconomic status. Likewise, a parent’s socioeconomic mobility is limited without meaningful support for their children. Addressing both generations at once through a powerful two-generation approach gives the greatest probability of achieving impact. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “…policymakers and funders also have a role to play: They can help remove the common obstacles and challenges that prevent organizations from fully realizing an approach that takes the whole family into account.” We seek to partner with policymakers in achieving this goal. In the first six months of the new administration, Governor DeWine has prioritized two-generation or whole family approaches.

We recommend that policymakers:

* 1. Engage parents and other users of resources in the Children’s Initiative in an explicit and meaningful way. Explicit means there are clear expectations of how parents can be engaged and meaningful ensures their input and recommendations are considered.
  2. Continue to encourage cross agency collaboration through the Children’s Initiative’s convening authority and stream meetings when possible so community partners can follow and learn, and consider holding field meetings in local communities, and visit sites where whole family approaches are successful.
  3. Strengthen core income and work support programs to include and promote opportunities that unlock the full potential of parents. Ensure programs are designed to construct the well-being of families and intentionally and simultaneously work with children and parents/caregivers together.
  4. Invest in programs that allow and encourage agencies and organizations to work with children and the adults in their lives together.
  5. Develop a countywide two-generation practice that supports family learning, partners with families as equals, and invites children to learn and allows adults to apply their skills.

1. **Embed literacy to increase opportunities for anyone engaging in public services related to employment**

Individuals enrolled in public services programming should have clear and easy access to literacy services as part of workforce related services. Integrating literacy into workforce programs is critical because job placement goals and learning goals are equally important to adult learner development. Successful educational outcomes support long-term workforce success. Often, learner outcomes required by funding agencies inhibit the successful attainment of objectives by both learners and programs. Learners who successfully attain employment outcomes struggle to devote adequate time to degree attainment or to literacy/numeracy gains. Conversely, many learners who show adequate annual educational gains do not meet employment outcomes. Aligning workforce and literacy goals, as well as helping programs integrate workforce and literacy education, can address this mismatch.

We recommend policymakers:

1. Incent the integration of basic education and workforce programs to increase the attainment and employment of individuals with low literacy or educational attainment.
2. Mandate that programs proactively connect post-secondary students to the SNAP, TANF, or WIOA supports they are eligible for. The newly announced National Skills Coalition’s Supportive Services Academy can help Ohio move forward.
3. Build the capacity of adult education and higher education partners to implement IEP programs.
4. Provide contextualized curriculum in targeted industry sectors or occupations for which there is a local employer demand.

**Key Activities:**

The recommendations outlined in this agenda will be advanced by the staff and board of The Literacy Cooperative. The staff are well positioned through engagement with local, state, and national organizations and the board can and should draw upon their expertise and relationships with public officials, funders, and other stakeholders. Specifically, The Literacy Cooperative Leadership will maintain engagement with:

Local: The Strategic Functions Committee of the Region 3 Workforce Development Board; the Cuyahoga County Aspire Advisory Committee; the Slavic Village P-16 Employment Committee; NEO Workforce Coalition; Say Yes to Education Kindergarten Readiness Task Force; Say Yes to Education Post-Secondary Access Assessments Task Force; Say Yes to Education Family Stability Task Force

State: The Leadership Committee of the Ohio Workforce Coalition; the Ohio Association for Adult and Continuing Education; and

National: The Coalition on Adult Basic Education; National Centers for Family Learning; Ascend at the Aspen Institute; ProLiteracy; National Skills Coalition; Open Door Collective.

Engagement with each of these groups, next steps for our Board, and other action steps are outlined in our agenda work plan for each core area.

**Advance Early Literacy Education**

Research from Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child has found that over 1 million new neural connections are formed every second during the first few years of life, creating the foundation for learning over the child’s lifetime. Building on this science, studies have found that investing in early childhood education is one of the most cost-efficient strategies for economic growth. Investments can occur through new programming, expansion of existing programing, and/or increased wages for child development associates. With this in mind, The Literacy Cooperative recommends that policymakers:

1. Continue to prioritize and fully fund high-quality early childhood education at scale, regardless of setting (i.e., center-based, school-based, etc.) and improve wages for child development associates.
2. Federal: The Committee for Education Funding has a strong advocacy platform which includes increasing funding in early education. Recognizing the importance of access to quality early education and its impact on a child’s future literacy, we support and align with their position of increasing the investment in education to five cents for every dollar of the federal budget.
3. State: Municipalities throughout the state are seeking to address the funding gaps created by the state to ensure all children within their geographic have access to high quality early childhood education. This is creating an uneven geography of access and leaving some early learners behind. The state should identify and fund communities most in need of supplemental funding to offer such access.
4. Local: A parent’s income is a significant determinant of their child’s early learning experiences and outcomes. The PRE4CLE plan clarifies the partnership with Cuyahoga County government to expand Universal Pre-K to all of Cleveland’s children. The expansion should increase the tuition assistance available to families, especially those with low income.
5. Ensure that all families can choose among options that meet high-quality standards and afford the early learning setting that is right for them
6. State: Ohio’s Step Up to Quality (SUTQ) has helped parents identify which early learning centers are meeting standards of quality which have been proven to stick with a child throughout their academic careers. As SUTQ expands to all state-funded preschools, the star ratings should be used to identify areas of need and opportunities of investment (for example only one preschool in East Cleveland has a five-star rating) to ensure all Ohio parents have high quality options no matter their community.
7. Local: PRE4CLE partners with a number of community organizations such as Cleveland Central Promise, Broadway P-16, and Cleveland Public Library. In this capacity, there is an opportunity to share best practices among partners to build the capacity of each organization and to create a stronger scaffolding for the implementation of the PRE4CLE Plan.
8. Dynamically and purposely reach out to and engage diverse groups of early childhood educators and funders in developing and implementing state and district plans
   1. State: The expertise of those delivering services and funding early childhood or whole family interventions is important to ongoing planning and their voice should be integrated into state and district plans. By working closely with school districts, community organizations, and service providers on the creation of feedback loops, we can help strengthen policies and ensure stakeholders are bought into the process. The Literacy Cooperative will support engagement efforts and is willing to host listening sessions, share information, or otherwise support efforts to secure feedback.
9. Highlight the success of Dolly Parton Imagination Libraries in Cuyahoga County to offer examples of ways to expand or bring national best practices for access to books beginning at birth
   1. State: The Ohio Governor’s Imagination Library will give children across Ohio the opportunity to receive new books and begin expanding their horizons from the moment they are born. Currently, there are over 700,000 children under the age of five in the state of Ohio, but less than 100,000 of those children are currently enrolled in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. We will share our outreach and engagement strategies to assist in the expansion of access throughout the state.
   2. Local: The gap in the amount of words and language heard by low income children and their wealthier peers from birth until age three leads to developmental delays that make achieving literacy a challenge. Locally, communities are using a number of national best practices to expand access for young readers: Broadway P-16 has become a “Little Free Library Community” which makes books more accessible to families in the community, 10 cities in Cuyahoga County have become hosts for “Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library” which mails books to enrolled children every month from birth to five, and 16 health centers are partnered with “Reach Out and Read Greater Cleveland” which incorporates books and family reading into pediatric care. Philanthropies in the Greater Cleveland region should look for ways to align strategy and pool funds to build the capacity and resources of these programs to ensure all children have access to these and other programs.

**Support two-generational practices and encourage parent engagement in early education**

Oftentimes improving the circumstances of families and increasing the literacy rates of children are seen as two distinct issues. However, research shows that development gaps between children who have parents with low income and low education levels and their peers who come from more affluent, well-educated families show up as early as three and persist through high school. Research also shows that low-income families spend a larger percent of their earnings on child care and preschool, even though the quality of these programs is not as high as those that their wealthier counterparts attend. To end this self-perpetuating cycle, many organizations such as the Aspen Institute, the United States Chamber of Commerce, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have started turning to two-generation strategies. With this in mind, The Literacy Cooperative recommends the following:

1. Engage parents and other users of resources in the Children’s Initiative in an explicit and meaningful way. Explicit means there are clear expectations of how parents can be engaged and meaningful ensures their input and recommendations are considered
   1. State: Since the Children’s Initiative office is new with this administration, we will recommend they conduct regional meetings to hear from stakeholders across the state.
   2. Local: The Literacy Cooperative will work to host a regional meeting in Cuyahoga County with the new Director of Children’s Initiatives. At this meeting, we will share the importance of whole family approaches to services and we will include parent voice.
2. Continue to encourage cross agency collaboration through the Children’s Initiative’s convening authority and stream meetings when possible so community partners can follow and learn, and consider holding field meetings in local communities and visit sites where whole family approaches are successful
   1. Local: Collaboratives such as Broadway P-16 and the Cleveland Public Libraries have both youth and adult literacy strategies. Public and private funders can invest strategically in these programs to build the staff’s understanding of and capacity to deliver a two-generation practice, including the holistic supports needed and the data capability to track two-generation outcomes across programs. Each site would be willing to host a meeting of the Children’s Initiative team.
3. Strengthen core income and work support programs to include and promote opportunities for parent engagement to strengthen their children(s)’ education
   1. State: The eligibility requirements for Ohio Works First state that a parent may use parenting classes and/or education activities as developmental/alternative activities for benefits. Expanding these activities to include parental engagement in their child’s education would benefit the family as a whole, where the child receives the benefit of a caring and engaged adult, a known driver of academic success, and the parent has an opportunity to participate in family learning, which can augment efforts to increase literacy.
4. Invest in programs that build a strong foundation in life for young children, including childcare and two-generational strategies that support parents in both employment and raising children
   1. Federal: Ascend from the Aspen Institute has explored the effectiveness of two-generation approaches across the country. From this work, they have identified Head Start and Child Care and Development Block Grants as priorities for supporting parental engagement and providing funding for child care. Recognizing the importance of engagement and support in two-generational strategies, the current funding levels for both programs should be maintained. Likewise, the current income threshold guidance for the Child Care and Development Block Grants should be maintained, if not increased.
   2. State: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has granted flexibility and guidance on how to use TANF, Medicaid, and Community Services Block Grants to implement two-generation strategies. Building from successes shown in Utah and Connecticut, the State should prioritize and incentivize collaborations among early childhood, human service, and post-secondary entities to support parents in fulfilling their responsibilities by helping them balance family and work priorities.
   3. Local: Through expansion of Universal Pre-K, County Jobs and Family Services will begin to work with the Office of Early Childhood to develop a two-generation family engagement structure that will integrate child care clients with workforce efforts. This work has already begun and the working committee that has been ongoing and will continue going forward. As the County implements this strategy, they should consider best practices from other two-generation efforts, like Cincinnati’s Intergenerational Success Project or Newport KY’s Brighton Center.
5. Develop a countywide two-generation practice that builds family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and their parents/caregivers together.
   1. Local: The Literacy Cooperative will continue to lead the 2Gen Working Group in completing the action steps to the Call To Action. We have hosted two cross-organizational learning opportunities and will aim to offer at least double that in 2020. We have supported development of four (4) 2Gen pilots and we will work to track the progress and share results of the pilots. Finally we will work to deepen parent engagement in 2Gen programming and we encourage local leaders to do the same.

**Embed literacy to Increase opportunities for anyone engaging in public services related to employment**

There are a variety of public programs that offer or require work or workforce related programming as a condition for continued support or services. These include CCMEP (Comprehensive Case Management Employment Program), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIOA (Workforce Investment & Opportunity Act) programming. There are also active conversations about allowing states to apply for waivers that would require Medicaid recipients to participate in work or workforce programming.Successful educational outcomes support long-term workforce success, but adult learners are frequently faced with having to make a choice between supporting their families or participating in literacy programming. There are nearly one million Ohioans without a high school diploma or equivalency and they are often stuck in low-wage jobs with limited opportunities for growth. Today, more than 36 million adults in the U.S. have limited English or reading skills and 60 million can’t perform basic math. Workplace literacy programs help to address these gaps and offer an on-ramp to middle-skill jobs. Ohio can increase access to remedial education and high school equivalency training by contextualizing curriculum and offering it as part of industry-specific training. This approach provides not only educational but also occupational credentialing as an outcome (i.e., Integrated Education & Training). With this in mind, The Literacy Cooperative recommends policymakers:

1. Incent the integration of basic education and workforce programs to increase the attainment and employment of individuals with low literacy or educational attainment.
   1. Federal: Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act is a priority of the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, the National Skills Coalition, and many other advocates. Nearly two-thirds of all jobs in the U.S. require education beyond high school and about half of the U.S. workforce—188 million adults—have only a high school diploma. Despite the need for credentials to advance, low income students do not complete education programs at the rate of their wealthier peers and funding for adult education has fallen by over 25% since 2001. Higher Education Act reauthorization must not include cost increasing provisions, such as the elimination or reduction of interest deferment on subsidized loans, and it should be funded at the $649 million level as called for in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014.
   2. State: State leaders should develop policy that requires better coordination between Job and Family Services and Ohio Aspire to incorporate literacy programming to be meaningfully embedded into all WIOA and TANF programming and should incent innovation in literacy programming.
   3. Local: Ohio’s adult basic education has been rebranded as ASPIRE and can serve as the ramp into career pathway programming offered by workforce development providers and through many libraries. Increased effort should be made to strengthen the partnership between ASPIRE and workforce service providers to better serve participants and to achieve WIOA performance metrics. Additionally, efforts should be made to ensure ASPIRE programs have access to training partners to create successful IET programs.
2. Mandate that programs proactively connect post-secondary students to the SNAP, TANF, or WIOA supports they are eligible for. The newly announced National Skills Coalition’s Supportive Services Academy can help Ohio move forward.
   1. Federal: The National Skills Coalition has been tracking changes proposed to the budget by the President, which include dramatic cuts to WIOA, ABE, SNAP, TANF and the Department of Education. As Congress looks to pass a longer-term spending bill, the funding levels for these important departments and programs should be maintained at current levels. National Skills Coalition has also launched a Supportive Services Academy and we encourage state leadership to participate in this effort.
   2. State: Oftentimes job search and work requirements in public assistance programs such as SNAP and TANF lead to poorer employment outcomes. The mandatory work requirement can force people into lower paying, lower quality jobs. A nationwide analysis has shown that those states which have implemented voluntary programs have better long-term outcomes for participants. Switching to a voluntary program could produce better outcomes for Ohio.
   3. Local: Cuyahoga Jobs and Family Services should continue to use SNAP 50-50 reimbursement to augment existing career pathway programs through the flexible funding model. Leadership should share the results of that work and encourage additional organizations to join the pilot.
3. Build the capacity of adult education and higher education partners to implement IEP programs.
   1. State: The Ohio Department of Higher Education convenes a Professional Development Network which provides learning opportunities, such as workshops, study circles, conferences, etc. for ASPIRE instructors. IEP programs should be a recurring topic for the network. The Literacy Cooperative will explore professional development partnerships on IEP and other innovative topics.
   2. Local: Learning networks are one of the most effective ways to spread and build practices. Looking across the county, a network of IEP program practitioners should convene to share best practices and identify ways to partner.
4. Provide contextualized curriculum in targeted industry sectors or occupations for which there is a local employer demand.
   1. State: The Literacy Cooperative has facilitated the development of contextualized curriculum in manufacturing, construction, IT, hospitality and healthcare. The Ohio Department of Education should inventory similar work from across the state and make it publicly available with technical assistance to implement.
   2. Regional: The regional WIOA plan has identified several “Opportunity Occupations” which have high local employer demand and do not require a bachelor degree—90% of these occupations require digital skills. Workforce service providers should adopt the contextualized curriculum and integrate it into their job-readiness programming to help better prepare job seekers for the skills needed for these occupations.
   3. Local: The Cuyahoga County Workforce Funders Group created an Action Plan to develop a coordinated, well-functioning workforce system for the County. The three industry sectors in Cuyahoga County that are fundamental to the region's economic development strategy are: manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology. The Literacy Cooperative will participate on the sector partnership committees to ensure awareness and access to the contextualized curriculum and to encourage its use to develop the skills of the new and incumbent workers.

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