

Family Literacy: A Plan for Whole-Family Success in New York



About Us

United Neighborhood Houses, founded in 1919, is the membership organization of 38 New York City settlement houses and community centers. UNH member organizations comprise of one of the largest human service systems in New York City and provide high-quality services at more than 600 locations to more than 750,000 New Yorkers each year. Through capacity building, program development, and advocacy,

Families United for Learning and Literacy was formed by United Neighborhood Houses, its member settlement houses, and partner organizations in 2017 to expand family literacy programming in order to meet the educational and economic needs of New York families.

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November, 2017



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Families United for Learning & Literacy

As New York's policymakers, private funders, and community-based organizations work to improve outcomes for the State's residents it is essential that they embrace approaches that address the root causes of limited economic opportunity. These include the lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills in children and adults that are necessary for success in both higher education and the labor market. According to 2013-2014 English Language Arts standardized test scores, 70% of New York City's third grade students were reading below grade level. For communities with low earnings this number is as high as 76%.¹ For adults, educational deficits are similarly prevalent, with 3.5 million adults across the State lacking English proficiency and/or a high school diploma. In working to address these crises, it is essential to recognize that children are deeply affected by the capabilities of their families and their communities. Literacy is a skill that can be effectively developed and passed on within families when they have the tools and supports to do so. The benefits of a family-centered approach to learning can generate positive effects that range from academic success within individual family units to broader community engagement. One of the most effective ways to support these outcomes in New York is to invest in family literacy programming.

While there are several sources of funding in New York for the different components of family literacy programming, none cover the full scope of family literacy and therefore fall short of supporting the success of whole families. Federal programs like Head Start, New York City investments like the First Readers Initiative, and the State Education Department's Literacy Zones all focus specifically on only one or two of these components, such as early childhood literacy, after-school academic enrichment, or adult literacy classes.

In response to this gap in funding and the significant potential of the family literacy model to promote whole-family educational and economic success, Families United for Learning and Literacy (FULL) was formed by United Neighborhood Houses, its member settlement houses, and partner organizations in 2017 to propose an investment in family literacy programs.



3.5 million adults in NY lack English proficiency and/or a high school diploma

The principles informing the proposed investment are:

We recognize that every child is a part of a family and that parents are the child's first, best teacher.

We recognize that a family's health, income, and education have a significant effect on the happiness and success of the child. The short- and long- term academic success of the child is dependent on the support of the family.

We recognize that every parent and guardian can develop the tools to teach and support their child in developing literacy skills. To that end, we believe that parent training courses, financial and health literacy support, and combined parent-child literacy options should be accessible to all who need them.

We believe that, together, the public and private sectors can play a fundamental role in promoting integrated family literacy programming and support.

We believe in leveraging existing investments to expand family literacy programs to build better and more effective integrated family literacy programming.

We believe there is a unique role for community-based organizations with experience working with both parents and their children and building strong, lasting relationships within their communities to provide integrated family literacy programming.

We believe in involving families in efforts to enhance and expand programs.

What is Family Literacy Programming?

Family Literacy programs are evidence-based programs designed to involve a whole family in their collective educational success. A U.S. Department of Education study found that the fundamental principles of a family literacy program recognize that “children’s early learning is greatly influenced by their parents, that parents must develop their own literacy skills in order to support their children’s educational success, and that parents are their children’s first and best teachers.”²² By engaging both children and their parents (or other adult family caregivers) in a collaborative and mutually reinforcing learning process, family literacy programs help families to gain the skills they need to succeed. Family Literacy programs consist of four major components, tied together by a team of staff that ensures relevance and continuity between the different activities and offer program opportunities for families to build literacy skills together:

Adult Literacy

Adult literacy programs may include basic adult literacy (reading, writing, and numeracy skills) contextualized to the needs and interests of parents, English for adults

who speak other languages, preparation for high school equivalency diplomas, linkages to high quality job training and college transition programs, and health and financial literacy support.

Child Literacy

Child literacy programs may include early literacy programs for preschool-aged children, as well as after-school programs for elementary and middle school-aged children. These programs focus on developing phonological understanding, reading and writing skills, and support for developing academic competencies.

"With these programs we can be empowered to have a future. More than anything we can show our kids we can be role models. There are programs for us no matter the walls. We do have a future, whether it takes eight years, or a week from now."
Anabel, East Side House Settlement

Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time

PACT time includes activities with dedicated parent-child interaction opportunities, where staff members help parents learn how to support their children's learning through interaction with each other in meaningful activities, such as joint reading activities, visits to libraries, and community service learning projects.

Parental Support

Parent support programs include life skills development, education on child development, parenting skills training, and work-readiness support. They connect parents with a wide array of community resources and opportunities to network and develop mutual support systems.

Small, successful family literacy programs have already been effectively implemented in New York City, but their scope is limited. These programs are an ideal model for community-based organizations to expand their family literacy programming. At one such program, children go to a Pre-K program during traditional school hours while their parents first attend an ESOL class and then go to a staff-led workshop on child development. At the end of the day the parents and children come together. After dinner, the group reads a story together. One week, the children take turns reading the book and telling the parents what they think will happen next. The next week the parents take turn reading and ask children questions about what the words mean and what they hope the characters will do. After the read-aloud, the parents and children do an activity together based on the book. For example, after reading “The Snowy Day” the families work on art projects depicting their favorite winter scenes.

The Need for Family Literacy Programming

The National Center for Educational Statistics' Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) defines literacy as "understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential."³ Child literacy levels in the United States are strongly linked to parents' educational attainment.⁴ One study found that a mother's reading skill is the single greatest determinant of her children's future academic success, outweighing other factors, such as neighborhood and family income.⁵ With the future success of children so closely tied to the education level of their parents, it is clear that gaps between families of different socioeconomic and educational strata exacerbate the larger issue of wealth inequality in the United States.

The PIAAC found the difference in literacy scores between the lowest and highest levels of parental educational attainment in the U.S. is more than twice that in countries like Korea or Finland.⁶ The U.S. has fallen drastically behind its international counterparts in developing effective programming to narrow this gap.

This difference is significant, as educational attainment is also highly correlated with income and wealth. For example:

- Literacy and educational attainment are widely recognized as the gateways to higher paying jobs and greater economic stability. In one of the only long-term studies of early parent and child intervention, James Heckman, an Economics Professor at the University of Chicago, found that, for girls, a comprehensive early childhood education program had positive effects on high school graduation, adult employment, and the adult labor incomes of participants and their parents. Boys show lower drug use and blood pressure, as well as posi-

tive effects on education and later labor income. The research found that for every dollar spent on high-quality, birth-to-five programs for lower-income children, they received a 13.7% per year return on investment.⁷

- Studies have found that families with lower incomes tend to have less awareness of, and less frequently utilize, effective learning techniques during reading activities with their children, for instance asking the child questions about what they think will happen next in a story. This results in less conceptual understanding of the materials.⁸

- Gaps between rich and poor children are exacerbated every summer, as lower-income children lose learning time and risk falling behind, a phenomenon known as "the Matthew Effect."⁹

- The Lexington Institute found that Spanish-speaking English-learners of working age make an average of \$3,000 less per year than their English-speaking peers as a direct result of their English language skills.¹⁰

- A student who cannot read on grade level by 3rd grade is four times less likely to graduate by age 19 than a child who does read proficiently by that time. Students from impoverished areas are 13 times less likely to graduate on time than their wealthier peers.¹¹

The Need for Family Literacy Programming in New York

Adult and child literacy levels in New York further demonstrate the significant need for family literacy programs:

- New York State is home to 3.5 million adult residents who lack English proficiency and/or a high school diploma. These New Yorkers earn significantly less than their peers, putting economic success for them and their families out of reach. A study done by Libertad Gonzalez, a university economist, found that, on average, limited English proficiency in the United States results in an overall wage penalty that lies between 3.8 and 38.6 percent, and reduces the probability of finding a job by up to 6.5 percentage points.¹²

- According to Literacy Partners of New York, 18 percent of New York City residents are not proficient in the



Students who can't read at grade level by 3rd grade are four times less likely to graduate by age 19

English language. This includes both immigrant and native New Yorkers.¹³

- In Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, the number of New York residents who are not proficient in the English language was as high as 24-28 percent in the period between 2009-13.¹⁴

- According to the New York State Education Department, only 38% of 3rd to 8th graders across the State are considered proficient in English Language Arts, and just 39% are proficient in Math. Many of these children will eventually leave high school prematurely, without the full range of skills necessary to succeed in post-secondary education or the job market.¹⁵

- Access to books and literary materials is severely limited in lower income areas. Most middle-class children have access to around 13 books each, while a lower-income neighborhood may have only one book for every 300 children.¹⁶

- A 2009 report by the Community Service Society found that every New York City resident who earns their high school diploma or its equivalent generates a net economic benefit of \$324,000 over their lifetime due to increased earnings and decreased reliance on public benefits.¹⁷

Benefits of Family Literacy

Family literacy programming works to close the achievement gap in lower-income families by helping both generations make progress together. Bi-partisan polling data from Ascend at The Aspen Institute found that a majority of Americans across party lines support this two-generational approach to academic and economic well-being.¹⁸ By supporting the parents and children together, family literacy programs help parents create better lives for their children while improving their own situation, creating a sense of agency and involvement that will be passed on to the next generation. The benefits of family literacy programs are multifold and evidence-based.

- The Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Penn State University found that some successful family literacy programs led to a 90% improvement in family engagement and a 20% increase in family literacy activities in the home and community, as well as improvements for parents in employability skills, self-efficacy, leadership skills, and social capital.¹⁹

- Studies have found that family literacy programs improve children's verbal and non-verbal engagement in PACT reading activities.²⁰

"I thought my child would learn to read when he went to school. He started school behind in his reading. Now with family literacy he's reading at grade level."

Sandra, St. Nicks Alliance

- Family literacy activities can lead to improved relationships between parents and children due to PACT activities, as well as increase parent-child interactive time, increase the number of books in the family's home, and encourage critical thinking skills.²¹

- The frequency of PACT activities can have a positive correlation to a child's reading outcomes, even taking into account differences in wealth and ethnicity.²²

- Family literacy programming can have a beneficial effect on behavioral issues in children. Several studies showed a positive correlation between improved literacy skills and a mitigation of behavioral problems.²³

- When parents improve their language ability, phonemic awareness, and metacognition (planning and management skills), they may apply these skills to their interactions with their children, thus creating a stronger basis for the child's developing language and critical thinking skills.²⁴

- Parental and guardian involvement in family literacy programs has been shown to increase children's school attendance records, reading levels, and reading proficiency. One study done by the National Center for Families Learning showed that children with parents who had completed 150 program hours were more than two times as likely to have an attendance rate of 90%. They also measured a 7.4% gain in reading level as compared to a 1.8% gain for comparison students, and a 5.6% gain in reading proficiency.²⁵

- A comprehensive study done by Old Dominion University and the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University on graduation rates found that family engagement was the single greatest determinant in a student's likelihood of succeeding at school.²⁶



Low-income neighborhoods may have only one book for every 300 children

Current Sources of Literacy Funding

There are several sources of funding for literacy-focused programs in New York, though they generally target one age group and remain under-resourced and limited in their scope. Funding for early childhood education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, and after-school programs, has allowed community-based organizations to strengthen academic outcomes for children, youth, and adults. These siloed investments can serve as the foundation for more holistic family literacy approaches, as none in their current scope supports whole family success. The following chart provides information on some existing literacy funding streams with a short summary of their supported programming and the ways additional investments can leverage existing ones to create family literacy programs.

Funding Source	Programs	Room for Growth
WIOA (Federal)	WIOA supports a range of adult literacy interventions including adult basic education (ABE), integrated English literacy and civics education (IEL/CE), high school equivalency (HSE) preparation and Literacy Zones.	Under the recent reauthorization of WIOA, the emphasis of programming is shifting away from meeting the needs of adult learners with the greatest need, and instead focuses on the most job-ready individuals, without significant emphasis on their children. Further, WIOA is focused on adults, not parents and children together.
Family English Initiative (City)	The FEI is a family engagement pilot program featuring a two-generation approach to strengthening language skills for non-native English speakers.	FEI is primarily geared towards non-native English speakers and does not include native English speakers with literacy support needs.
First Readers Initiative (City)	The First Readers Initiative supports early literacy enrichment efforts in New York City by providing parent engagement workshops, reading opportunities for younger children, and access to literacy resources.	The First Readers Initiative is focused on resource building and providing parent engagement tools and reading opportunities. The program does not adequately address adult literacy and how low literacy rates in parents can lead to an inability to effectively engage parents in activities that support their children's learning.
DYCD Adult Literacy Program (City)	The NYC Adult Literacy Program funds adult literacy programming for adults and out-of-school youth over the age of 16. These programs focus on adult basic education, High School Equivalency attainment, and English for Speakers of Other Languages with the goal of supporting job attainment and/or continuing education.	The Adult Literacy Initiative is focused entirely on populations 16 years of age and older and does not include parent engagement, parent training, or early learning programs.
Head Start (Federal and City)	Head Start programs promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services for enrolled children and families. Programs primarily serve children aged 3-5.	Head Start is income-eligible, and primarily geared towards children aged 3-5. These programs do not adequately address adult literacy issues that can lead to a parent's inability to effectively engage in literacy activities with their child.
21st Century Community Learning Centers (Federal)	21st Century Community Learning Centers are federally-funded, state-administered after-school programs that focus on providing students with support to meet state and local standards for core academic subjects.	While 21st Century Community Learning Centers may provide literacy and supportive services to families participating in their program, there is no formalized family literacy or adult literacy program.
Beacon and Cornerstones (City)	Beacon and Cornerstones are city-funded programs that work in schools and public housing developments to serve both low-income youth and their families to provide academic support and youth development.	While Beacon and Cornerstone programs may provide literacy and supportive services to families participating in their program, there is no formal family literacy program.

The Investment Plan

Although each of these funding streams allow settlement houses and other community-based organizations to meet different types of literacy needs in their communities, none of them allow for a comprehensive approach to supporting the full range of needs within families. While some community organizations are able to offer versions of family literacy, most are not able to scale to meet the needs of their communities. By building on these existing investments at a modest additional cost, these programs can be leveraged to generate stronger family outcomes.

There are three options for supporting family literacy in New York:

- Leverage existing funding streams with an additional investment in order to build out a family literacy program serving 30 families. While the exact cost would vary from program to program, funding would be used to add additional staffing and resources so programs serving one generation could expand to serve the whole family. The key to developing single-generation-focused programs into family-focused ones is a program coordinator, who will direct the integration of family literacy programming with the goal of bringing parents and children together, helping families build social capital, coordinating services discrete to one generation into a more unified program, and collecting and analyzing data that measures the impact on the family as a whole.

- Strengthen and develop community organizations already offering family literacy programs. These organizations often are unable to maintain a fully robust and comprehensive model that meets full demand without sustained investment. A focus on investments in community-based organizations takes advantage of existing structures by helping them incorporate a whole family approach, rather than creating entire family literacy programs from scratch.

- Provide capacity building grants to organizations in communities that would benefit from family literacy. This funding would allow these organizations to complete community needs assessments, explore community partnerships and provide training to staff.

"I love family literacy and never miss a session. I get to have one-on-one time with my child which is hard to do when you have four children. The age-appropriate books make it interesting for kids to learn."
Karla, Educational Alliance

In all instances, it is important that funded organizations are offered the flexibility to offer creative and locally-tailored models of family. Direct service grants would be up to \$270,000 per organization to reach 30 families; capacity building grants would be \$85,000 per organization. Investment in the family literacy model would provide the resources necessary to leverage existing piecemeal programs to create holistic interventions with stronger outcomes for children and parents. FULL looks forward to the support of City, State, and philanthropic stakeholders to make these exciting possibilities a reality for thousands of New Yorkers.



76% of third-grade students in NYC's low earning areas are below grade level in English Language Arts

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