



It Takes a Village

How Community Organizations, Schools, and Families Can Work Together to Support Early Childhood Literacy

About the documentary

Developing a child's literacy skills during early childhood (ages 0–8) is critical to their academic and economic success.^{1,2,3,4} Partnerships that are focused on early literacy and established between community organizations, school districts, and families can grow students' reading abilities.

To illustrate how community organizations can support the development of children's early literacy skills, Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest collaborated with the Chicago public broadcasting station WTTW to create a 19-minute documentary. This effort is part of the [REL Midwest Early Childhood Education Research Alliance](#), which is dedicated to increasing educators' capacity to access, conduct, and make sense of early childhood education research and to support the use of this research in decisionmaking at the state and local levels. The program discusses how organizations can incorporate literacy development into their work with children and how they can effectively partner with school districts to promote early childhood literacy. The documentary features school districts and community organizations in Chicago and Rockford, Illinois.

In this documentary, researchers Jill Bowdon, PhD (REL Midwest); Sarah Caverly, PhD (American Institutes for Research); and Laura Justice, PhD (Ohio State University) discuss the importance of building a child's early literacy skills and how community organizations can support students' literacy development. The program highlights effective partnerships between community organizations and school districts, including Open Books' partnership with Chicago Public Schools and Rockford Public Library's partnership with Rockford Public Schools. The documentary also highlights organizations that provide early literacy programming to their local communities, including Reach Out and Read and the Steans Family Foundation's work in the North Lawndale neighborhood on Chicago's West Side.

Intended audience

REL Midwest created this documentary as a tool for community organizations and school districts to use when creating or refining partnerships to support the development of students' early childhood literacy skills. The documentary focuses on examples from Illinois, but the information and evidence shared in the program offer important learnings for people and

Literacy is the foundation for not only academic success and career success and full economic participation, but it's also the foundation for full civic participation...

It really does take a village, and the village has stepped up with this common mission of making sure that our kids are entering kindergarten ready to learn and ready to learn to read.

– Yolanda Knight, Program Director,
Steans Family Foundation



Scan the QR code to
watch the documentary.

1 D'Agostino, J. V., & Rodgers, E. (2017). Literacy achievement trends at entry to first grade. *Educational Researcher*, 46(2), 78–89. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1134627>

2 Reardon, S. F., & Portilla, X. A. (2016). Recent trends in income, racial, and ethnic school readiness gaps at kindergarten entry. *AERA Open*, 2(3), 1–18. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1194406.pdf>

3 Lesnick, J., Goerge, R., Smithgall, C., & Gwynne, J. (2010). *Reading on grade level in third grade: How is it related to high school performance and college enrollment?* Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

4 Hernandez, D. J. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

groups based outside the state. REL Midwest hopes viewers will watch the program and use the following questions as a starting point for a discussion of how organizations can play a role in supporting early childhood literacy development within their communities.

? Discussion questions

- What concepts or themes from the documentary resonate with you?
- What were common strategies that all partnerships in the documentary used to support early literacy? How did the partnerships support early literacy differently, and what are the strengths in their distinct approaches?
- How have you seen organizations support early childhood literacy in your community? What types of programming do they offer? What programs highlighted in the video might be added to the network of programs in your community to better serve children and families?
- If you were part of an effort to create a similar network of programs or develop additional programs to existing ones in your community, what organizations or individuals would you recommend be involved in early planning conversations? What groups of children, neighborhoods, or schools would you target first and why? How would you communicate about the effort and invite community partners to join the effort? What first steps would need to be taken to move discussions forward?
- In your community, what challenges do you see in forming partnerships between community organizations and school districts to support early childhood literacy development? What are possible ways to overcome these challenges?
- What types of supports and structures are needed to sustain partnerships between community organizations and school districts in your community?
- How can organizations and school districts in your community partner more effectively to develop students' literacy skills?



Related REL Midwest videos

Watch REL Midwest's video [Integrating play into literacy instruction: Strategies for your classroom](#) and an [extended interview with literacy expert Tim Shanahan, Ph.D.](#) These videos discuss how to implement research-based literacy practices from the What Works Clearinghouse practice guides through play-based learning.

For more information

The research-based literacy practices featured in the videos are from two IES What Works Clearinghouse Educator's Practice Guides: [Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#) and [Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#).

Foundational Skills
to Support Reading



Improving Reading
Comprehension



About REL Midwest

REL Midwest is part of a network of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. REL Midwest works in partnership with practitioners in seven Midwest states to conduct applied research and provide training, coaching, and technical support to create a more evidence-based education system. To learn more, visit the [REL Midwest website](#) and follow [@RELMidwest on Twitter](#).