

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The state must partner with nonprofit community organizations to improve student achievements through proven literacy programs

### CHALLENGE | Most Oregon Children Miss Critical Literacy Milestone

The benefits of early literacy are well understood, yet two-thirds of all Oregon fourth-graders are not reading at a proficient level according to one of the most widely accepted benchmarks.<sup>1</sup> These numbers are even more alarming for historically underserved students.

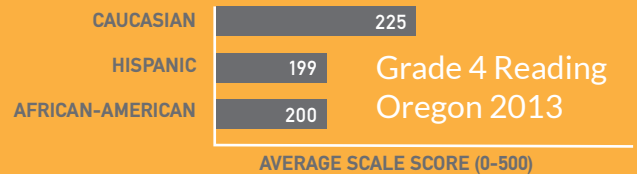
Early literacy programs are critical to improving third-grade reading outcomes, which correlate with improving Oregon's graduation rate.

### FINDINGS | The State Must Support Local Organizations

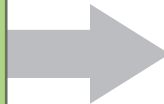
The Early Literacy Success Alliance's (ELSA) findings are simple: Schools can't go it alone — the state must also invest in and partner with evidence-based nonprofit community literacy organizations.

Oregon has a solution "hiding in plain sight." ELSA organizations — serving children in doctors' offices, schools, community centers and libraries — already have a presence in every county in the state, reaching over 1.2 million kids each year with effective and proven methods.

#### ACHIEVEMENT GAPS BETWEEN STUDENT RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS <sup>1</sup>



77% OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS  
90% OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES  
97% OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS



**DID NOT MEET 2015  
PROFICIENCY STANDARDS<sup>1</sup>**

## RECOMMENDATIONS | Invest in What's Working

In Oregon, effective early literacy programs exist and are ready to be scaled. By partnering with community programs, small investments can be significantly leveraged across the state. ELSA recommends:

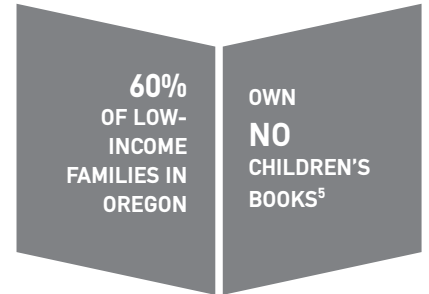
1. **Consulting with leaders of literacy-focused community programs** when making decisions affecting early literacy policy and practice.
2. **Investing in what's working.** Leverage investments in proven strategies that are ready to serve more children in need.
3. **Creating a pool of public and private funding** that allows for greater investment in effective and culturally specific literacy programs.
4. **Expanding eligibility to compete for public funding,** with particular attention to literacy programs focused on closing the education gap.

# PROVEN IMPACT

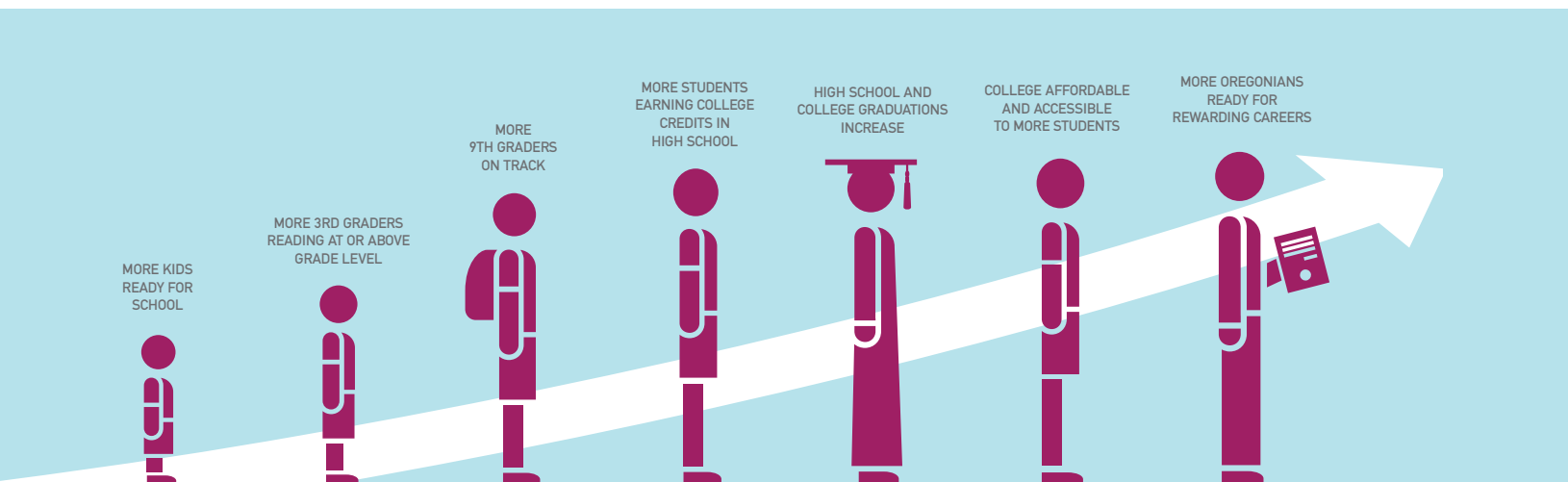
The nonprofit partners that comprise ELSA use evidence-based, culturally relevant methods to support schools and families in putting young children on a path to reading success.

## EXISTING PROGRAMS | ELSA Programs Throughout the State Currently:

- **Start early** through visits to prospective and new parents at home and delivery of literacy education at well-child visits to health providers. Lower-income children are likely to hear 30 million fewer words between birth and age four than their higher income peers, impacting later success at school.<sup>2</sup> ELSA partners help close this gap.
- **Engage families** with home visits, conversations at health care appointments, literacy events at schools and libraries and community-based workshops.
- **Partner for systemic change** by boosting kindergarten readiness through partnerships with Head Start teachers, child care professionals, school districts, and health care clinics.
- **Close the book ownership gap** and encourage reading before kindergarten and outside of school by providing access to reading materials tailored to diverse learning needs, including bilingual and culturally specific books. In 2015-16, more than 22% of students in Oregon schools were Hispanic/Latino.<sup>3</sup>
- **Leverage one-on-one support** to help students build specific literacy skills and catch up with their peers, closing gaps in progress or achievement.
- **Focus on equity** by developing culturally specific and culturally responsive interventions and creating partnerships that help close systemic gaps in resources for underserved communities. African-American and Hispanic students who do not reach reading proficiency by grade four are at even greater risk for not graduating on time.<sup>4</sup>



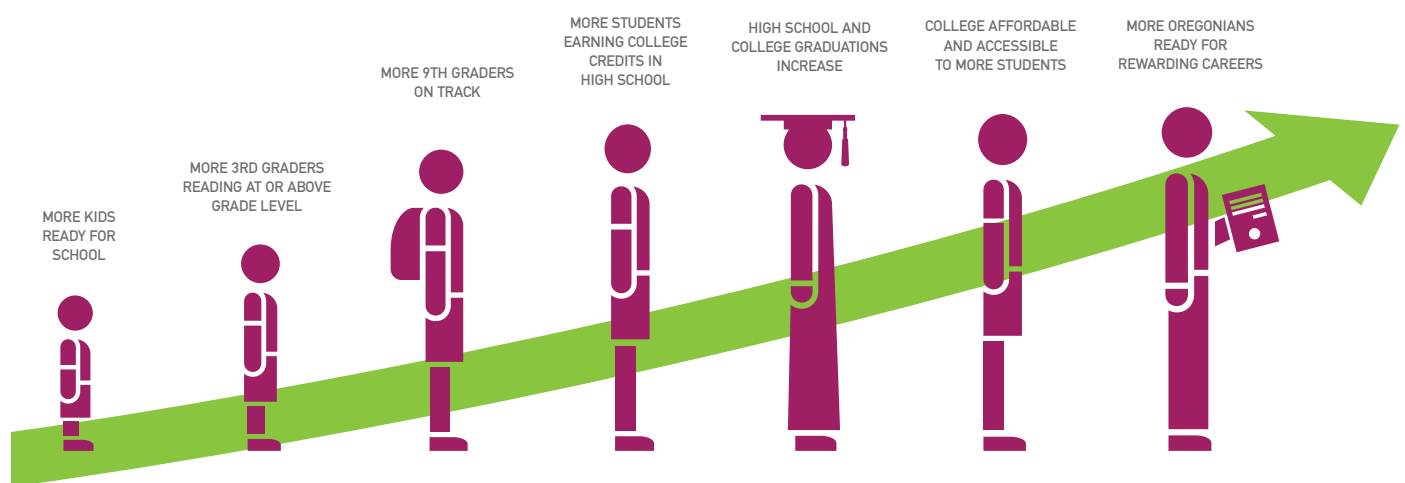
1. As defined by NAEP, a national assessment known as "The Nation's Report Card." <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>  
2. Thirty Million Words Initiative, <http://thirtymillionwords.org/tmw-initiative/>, citing Hart & Risley (1996)  
3. Based on ODE fall membership counts at <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?=3225>  
4. Hernandez, Donald J. Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012  
5. Reach Out and Read Fact Sheet: <http://www.reachoutandread.org/media/46483/roronepagerfinal11.18.13.pdf>



## SUMMARY

Oregon's 10-year plan identifies "all third-graders are reading at grade level" as a key success metric for education ([www.oregon.gov/COO/Ten/Pages/education.aspx](http://www.oregon.gov/COO/Ten/Pages/education.aspx)). Likewise, the website for the Chief Education Office states: "We believe that one of the most effective returns on investment Oregon can make in the future is to prioritize resources that ensure that gaps between students don't develop, and those that have, are closed before students are in third grade."

There is broad agreement across sectors that third-grade reading proficiency is not only an essential learning milestone, but also a critical contributor to high school graduation and therefore to the economy.



However, the stark resource and achievement disparities that affect this critical early milestone for Oregon's children of color, lower-income children, English-language learners, and children with disabilities are less well known. Community-based organizations – in partnership with families, schools, health care providers, and libraries – are working hard to close these gaps. More attention to the role of these community partners, and greater investments in the support they provide, can accelerate progress for all of Oregon's children.

This paper highlights an urgent problem for our state, focuses on community programs as underutilized scalable solutions, and recommends that readers embrace the multiple ways that evidence-based, equity-focused community programs can provide even stronger support for children's early learning.

# Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

## INTRODUCTION: LITERACY BEGINS EARLY AND INVOLVES EVERYONE

*"All Oregon children—across social, economic and racial strata — receive the access, support and resources they need to succeed in reading and learning."*

That's the vision of the Early Literacy Success Alliance, or ELSA, a two-year-old coalition of Oregon nonprofit organizations and public libraries. From home visits for prospective and new parents, to a baby's first visit to the doctor, through the transition to kindergarten and all the way through the early grades – these organizations are working together to make this vision a reality.

Unfortunately, the reality for many of Oregon's young children still falls far short of ELSA's vision.

Looking at just one widely accepted benchmark – reading proficiency at the end of third grade – highlights significant gaps in support for children ages 0-8. Fewer than half of Oregon's children are meeting state English/Language Arts benchmarks in grades 3 or 4.<sup>1</sup> What's more, fully two-thirds of all Oregon fourth-graders are not reading at a proficient level as defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>2</sup> That number grows to 77% for low-income students, to 90% for students with disabilities, and to 97% for English-language learners.

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While this is not a new problem, research in multiple fields over the last decade helps us see the problem more clearly and points us toward a greater range of solutions. We know more today than ever before about very young children's brain development, the effects of both trauma

and poverty, the importance of socio-emotional learning, the strong relationship between third-grade reading success and high school graduation, and the economic impact of failing to graduate high school. We are also more aware than ever before of the role and the impact of institutional racism – resulting in disproportionate disciplinary rates, persistent underfunding, disparate access to advanced courses, and the absence of culturally responsive books and other resources.<sup>3</sup> New knowledge allows us to tackle anew the historic inequities our state's statistics show.

### CASCADING CONSEQUENCES

Children who don't read proficiently by the end of third grade are four to six times more likely to leave high school before graduating. Each non-graduate costs society \$260,000 or more over a lifetime of lost earnings, reduced tax revenue, and need for potential social services.

# Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

The road to reading begins during a child's first days of life – a time of rapid brain development that sets the stage for later learning. The reasons that young children aren't becoming proficient readers begin long before they enter school, and the consequences reach through high school graduation and beyond. Ensuring that all children get the support they need to become proficient readers by the end of third grade must therefore be everyone's responsibility. Neither families nor schools can do it alone. That's why members of ELSA and other community-based programs across the state are working in partnership with families, pre-school programs, schools, and each other to:

- **BUILD A FOUNDATION FOR VERY EARLY LEARNING** by visiting prospective and new

parents at home, delivering literacy education to new parents at the hospital, providing books and advice to parents at well-baby visits, and modeling reading aloud and constructive play through library story time.

- **ENGAGE FAMILIES** through home visits, conversations at the doctor's office, literacy events at schools and libraries, and community-based workshops supporting school success.

- **BOOST KINDERGARTEN READINESS** through partnering with Head Start teachers, child care professionals, school districts, and health care clinics to deliver training to families that supports early literacy development and socio-emotional development.

- **ENCOURAGE READING** before school begins, beyond the school day and over the summer by delivering books to families at home, encouraging regular visits to the library, providing access to reading materials tailored to diverse learning needs, and building home libraries that include bilingual and culturally specific books.

- **CLOSE GAPS IN PROGRESS OR ACHIEVEMENT THAT SHOW UP IN THE EARLY GRADES** by reading one-on-one with pre-school and school-age children during the school day; providing one-on-one and small-group reading intervention, using proven models and trained volunteers, to help students build specific literacy skills and catch up with their peers; and creating unique "Super Sensory Literacy Spaces" and specialized resources for teachers serving children in special education.

## ELSA: WHO WE ARE

As of June 2016, the Alliance includes:

- Black Parent Initiative
- The Children's Book Bank
- Metropolitan Family Service
- Oregon Public Libraries
- Reach Out and Read Oregon
- Reading Results
- The Shadow Project
- SMART (Start Making A Reader Today)

Each member is focused in whole or in part on early literacy development, serves children and families most in need of additional support, and is a culturally specific or culturally responsive organization committed to equity. New members are welcome.

# Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

- **FOCUS ON EQUITY** by attending to persistent opportunity gaps related to race, ethnicity, and culture; emphasizing service to children who can benefit most from additional support; developing culturally specific and culturally responsive interventions; and creating partnerships that help close systemic gaps in resources for underserved communities.

These activities have all been proven to support both the skills and capacities children need to become successful independent readers, and to continue learning in social settings like school. In addition, delivering these services through nonprofit and public programs adds hundreds of thousands of hours of trained volunteer time and staff time to families' homes, health care settings, pre-schools, and schools – adding significant human resource capacity in a cost-effective way. Plus, they collectively add millions of dollars in donated value through volunteer hours, books, and other resources.

Through public and private investments, these supports are delivered to tens of thousands of children and families at no cost to them. That's good news. But there's still more to do.

## EARLY READING, EQUITY & THE ECONOMY

### ACHIEVEMENT GAPS BETWEEN STUDENT RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS<sup>4</sup>



As noted above, fewer than half of Oregon's children are meeting state English/Language Arts benchmarks in grades 3 or 4; and two-thirds of all Oregon fourth-graders are not reading at a proficient level as defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>4</sup> That means that at best, between one-third and one-half of Oregon's children aged 0-8 are getting the resources and supports they need to reach early learning benchmarks. Those numbers are cause for alarm; and yet, the picture for specific subgroups is even more sobering. There are four particularly notable gaps: for lower-income students, students with disabilities,<sup>5</sup> specific groups of children of color, and English-language learners. More specifically:

- 77% of low-income students, 90% of students with disabilities, and 97% of English-language learners did not meet the "proficient" standard in 2015.<sup>6</sup>
- Students eligible for free/reduced lunch had an average score that was 27 points lower than that for students who were not eligible. **The performance gap for lower-income students is not significantly different than it was in 1998.** (Emphasis added.)

# Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

- In 2015, Hispanic students had an average score that was 25 points lower than that for White students.
- In 2013 (the most recent year for which this data is available), 89% of Black fourth-graders did not meet the “proficient” standard. Black students had an average score that was 25 points lower than that for White students.<sup>7</sup>

## OREGON'S GRADUATION RATE

is at 72% – about 10 points lower than the national average of 82.3%. Poverty plays a significant role in who graduates and who doesn't: the statewide graduation rate for non-low-income students is 81.5%, nearly at the national average. This gap points us toward a key equity issue: students with more resources are catching up between 3rd and 12th grade, while students with less are getting left behind.

These same gaps are mirrored in Oregon's graduation rates for specific subgroups. At the national level, graduation rates for all students have been rising. Oregon, however, remains one of 10 states that graduated less than 70% of students from all five of these subgroups in 2013-2014: students with disabilities, Hispanic/Latino students, Black/African-American students, low-income students, and English-language learners.<sup>8</sup> The gap is widest for students with disabilities, whose statewide graduation rate is just over 51%.

Overall, according to the annual *Building a Grad Nation* report,<sup>9</sup> Oregon's graduation rate is at 72% – about 10 points lower than the national average of 82.3%. In addition to persistent racial disparities – which have their roots in historic inequitable investment and even disinvestment<sup>10</sup> – poverty plays a significant role. The statewide graduation rate for non-low-income students is 81.5%, nearly at the national average. What this tells us is that students with more resources are catching up by the end of high school, while others are continuing to fall behind. **To close the gaps, we must make investments during children's early years at home and at school.**

## Growing complexity offers new opportunities and demands a multifaceted response

One challenge for Oregon is that the groups most affected by resource and achievement gaps are growing, which places greater demands on the interventions that could close these gaps. Children First for Oregon reported last year that the child poverty rate had increased by 10% since 2009, and by 25% since 2007.<sup>11</sup> In 2015-2016, more than 22% of students in Oregon schools were Hispanic/Latino – a number that has grown more than 15% since the 2008-2009 school year, and now represents the fastest-growing school demographic.<sup>12</sup> These demographic changes vary by county and community, but there's no question that Oregonians aged 0-8 are a much more diverse population today than 10 years ago. Diversity brings many social and economic benefits to our state. At the same time, increasing language and cultural diversity alongside stresses on families such as the rise in poverty and the mobility associated with gentrification mean



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that ensuring all young readers get the support they need is a more complex job than ever before.

The achievement gaps that appear for young readers in third grade have their roots in early resource and opportunity gaps. For example, lower-income children are likely to hear 30 million fewer words between birth and age four than their higher-income peers.<sup>13</sup> This gap has an impact on letter recognition, vocabulary development, and later success in school. Studies show that young children's literacy development benefits from books at home, yet the ratio of books to children in low-income neighborhoods is just one book for every 300 children, compared to the ratio of 13 books per child in middle- and upper-income neighborhoods. Sixty percent of low-income families in Oregon own no children's books.<sup>14</sup> It's no surprise, then, that young children's readiness for kindergarten (one predictor of third-grade reading proficiency) is edging upward, but varies widely by neighborhood, as the *Oregonian* reported earlier this year.<sup>15</sup>

## LANGUAGE-RICH INTERACTIONS

with adults, time spent reading, and access to books are all essential to children's growth as readers. These activities build vocabulary, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and a love for learning.

## Early gaps have significant economic, academic, and equity consequences

Children who experience these resource gaps during their first years of life are much less likely to become proficient readers by the end of third grade. Without that foundation, students have difficulty shifting from learning to read to the more complex demands of reading to learn across subjects in the higher grades.

These gaps follow students all the way through their school careers. As previously mentioned, children who don't reach third-grade reading benchmarks are at much higher risk of failing to graduate high school on time. Students who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers. Students who don't reach this benchmark and who live in poverty for at least a year, particularly those who are African-American or Hispanic, are at even greater risk for not graduating on time.<sup>16</sup> One consequence for Oregon is that over the last two years, we have had one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the country.

Beyond the educational equity consequences, these achievement gaps come at a huge economic cost. One recent report estimates that if Oregon had graduated 6,350 more young people in the class of 2013, the state would have gained 550 new jobs and \$11 million in additional state and local tax revenue.<sup>17</sup> A 2015 report from EcoNorthwest makes a bolder claim: the racial achievement gaps in Oregon have cost the state nearly \$2 billion over the last 10 years.<sup>18</sup>

The time is right for a new call to action.



# Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

## **INVEST, DON'T INVENT:** LEVERAGE THE POWER OF COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Oregon has a solution “hiding in plain sight” that can help children enter kindergarten ready to learn, raise achievement for all students, close the gap for those who are falling behind, and ultimately affect high school graduation rates and our state’s economic health: evidence-based programs provided by nonprofit organizations and public libraries. These community programs work in partnership with schools, with pre-school providers and child-care professionals, or directly with families to provide supportive age-appropriate interventions.

The organizations that joined together to form the Early Literacy Success Alliance (ELSA) are dedicated to coordinating and amplifying their impact. This group’s focus on literacy development for children ages 0-8 complements broader cradle-to-career collective impact efforts.

These programs and organizations, along with others in Oregon, are:

- Collaborating with each other, to leverage discrete strengths and avoid duplication of services.
- Designing and delivering culturally specific and culturally responsive interventions.
- Supporting parents in their roles as first teachers and school partners.
- Offering partnership support to schools.
- Helping teachers recapture instructional time for all students.
- Engaging in systematic evaluation to improve practice, share lessons learned, and show impact.
- Bringing resources to the table – private foundation money, public interagency partnership (e.g. libraries), individual contributions, in-kind (e.g. books), and trained/coordinated volunteer hours.

Here are just a few examples of the results these efforts are yielding for Oregon’s children.

### **For the families in our state who will benefit most from extra support, these organizations are boosting early literacy development for children 0-5.**

**Black Parent Initiative (BPI)** supports early-years and early-grades literacy through two programs: *Together We Can*, an intensive home visiting model; and *Parent University*, which delivers education and training to parents and families. The design of BPI’s culturally-specific programming is explicitly built upon and connected to the cultural values and traditions of Black and African people; and programming illuminates and promotes the positive cultural and racial identity of Black, Bi-Racial, and Multi-Ethnic people. Building a strong sense of identity contributes to overall well-being, provides support for modifying harmful behaviors, and encourages people to achieve their dreams. Further, parents and caregivers strengthen involvement in the lives of their children. In 2014-2015, more than 1,200 adults and children participated in 2,000 hours

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of home visiting and more than 100+ hours of education-focused programming. Outcomes include parents completing high school or GED programs, families with housing needs securing stable housing, and parents reporting that they know more ways to support their children's schoolwork as well as their learning at home. The high school completion outcomes are particularly important for children's literacy, since maternal educational attainment has been found to have a positive relationship to children's educational outcomes. Through preserving and instilling historical values, BPI transforms the lives of families and children.

Today, Latinos make up 12% of the population of Multnomah County, and **Latino Network** has become one of the leading culturally specific organizations serving this population. Among the organization's transformative programs is *Juntos Aprendemos (Together We Learn)*, a model early education program with a 16-year history of improving kindergarten readiness skills for Latino children and supporting parents as their children's first teachers. In 2015-2016, the program served 155 children ages 3-5 at eight school sites. In 2016-2017, the program will grow to serve 200 children at 10 school sites. Findings from a 2016 evaluation, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methods, show that (1) eight out of 10 participating children scored higher across key kindergarten readiness indicators of early literacy and early numeracy; (2) parents increased the number of days per week they read to their child and engaged in other educational activities; and (3) parents report that the program gives them the confidence and tools to be their child's education advocate, increasing engagement in activities such as volunteering in the classroom and building the confidence to request meetings with school officials. The evaluation also reveals that the program is a catalyst for broader changes, including parents' willingness to challenge gender norms within their families and their culture, to build a college mindset for their children and their community, and to resist institutional racism.

**Oregon's Public Libraries** provide an extensive array of services for children and families from birth onward. Alongside schools, they are critical public institutions for supporting children's literacy development and a lifelong love for learning. Libraries are free, available in every community, filled with culturally specific, bilingual, and bicultural resources, and populated with staff who can not only help choose a good book for any age or interest but who also speak several languages and encompass a wide range of literacy-related expertise. One way **Multnomah County Library** reaches out to low-income families who have few books in the home and are not traditional library users is through the *Every Child A Reader* program, supported by the nonprofit **Library Foundation**. *Every Child A Reader* enables the library system to give each new parent a gift at the hospital to encourage library visits; provide materials and workshops that encourage parents to sing, talk, play, read, and write every day with children as they are developing language; deliver rotating collections of age-appropriate books to center-based and home-based early childhood providers; and lend theme-based bags of picture books and puzzles in English and Spanish to families to support literacy development at home. As a result, a family survey conducted in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese shows that in 2014-2015 the overwhelming majority of participating parents increased the time they spent reading with their children, used the read-aloud strategies the program teaches, and reported that children spent more time reading on their own – all outcomes that have positive effects on early literacy.

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*Ready, Set, Go!*, a program of **Metropolitan Family Service (MFS)**, is a Spanish/English bilingual early learning program that offers avenues to healthy child development, kindergarten readiness, and parent engagement. Currently offered in North Clackamas and Centennial School Districts, the program's strategies include home visits, parent/child interaction groups, kindergarten readiness workshops, and parenting education. As a result, children who attended did significantly better than the state average on the social/emotional measure of the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (4.1 out of 5, vs. the average of 3.7); and 90% of children scored at a literacy level considered ready for kindergarten on the Get Ready to Read early literacy assessment. Ninety-eight percent of parents reported that their children better understand school routines and classroom structure, and are excited to start kindergarten. Parents also embraced their roles as a child's first teacher, and became more confident about supporting learning at home.

**Reach Out and Read Oregon (ROR)** prepares our state's youngest children to succeed in school by educating parents about language development, modeling ways that parents can stimulate children's socio-emotional learning, prescribing a daily dose of reading from birth, and providing one new age-appropriate book at each well-child visit through 5 years of age. As a result, children enter kindergarten with a six-month head start in the developmental skills necessary for learning to read; have a home library of at least 10 children's books where sometimes there were none; and are four times more likely to have a parent read aloud with them as part of their daily routine (10x in families where English is not the primary language). ROR prioritizes serving children in low-income, high-need clinical settings, including English-language learners and other children affected by achievement gaps. More than 95% of children in Oregon see a primary care provider during their first two years of life, making ROR the only statewide organization with the potential to engage almost all families during a critical early period of children's brain development. (Differences in receptive and expressive language have been documented as early as 18 months of age, indicating that intervention needs to occur very early for children to have equal opportunity for success.) Each year, ROR Oregon serves over 70,000 children and engages more than 100,000 parents and caregivers in their children's early literacy development while utilizing approximately 900 volunteers. With further support, ROR could reach the remaining 70% of young children across the state who are not currently served by the program.

“ [Reading Results] is one of the best examples in our community of an organization that has succeeded in building effective partnerships in delivering quality instruction to academic priority children. The fact that the schools themselves invest in the program at a time when resources are so scarce is a sure sign of the high regard with which principals and teachers value the program. ”

– **Dan Ryan, CEO, All Hands Raised**

## Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

**For children who arrive at school without all the tools they need to become strong readers in the early grades, these programs work in partnership with schools to help struggling readers catch up with their peers.**

*AARP Experience Corps*, an evidence-based, award-winning national program, serves nine Portland-area elementary schools through its local partnership with **MFS**. An innovative cross-generational strategy, the program matches volunteers aged 50+ with children K-3 who are struggling with reading. Trained tutors and mentors, assigned to high-need schools in teams, spend 4-10 hours each working one-on-one and in small groups to build children's reading-related skills and confidence. In 2014-2015, 50 tutors delivered more than 9,700 hours of service to nearly 2,000 students. As a result, 93% of teachers reported that participation influenced students' reading performance, 90% of students showed a reduction in disruptive behavior, and 62% of participating students demonstrated improved attendance. A rigorous national evaluation has also shown that the program has a statistically significant effect on improving students' vocabulary and reading comprehension. MFS has also developed innovative pilots linking AARP Experience Corps with Ready, Set, Go! Community Schools and other collaborative and collective impact efforts.

Working toward the vision that all children read and succeed, **Reading Results** partners with schools serving low-income students and students of color to provide a proven reading intervention for students who are already falling behind. This is a critical step toward ensuring that struggling learners get on the path toward academic success and a brighter future. With each of its school partners, Reading Results identifies first, second and third graders falling behind in reading and provides a direct and explicit reading intervention program that is aligned with state standards. Working through an equity lens, highly trained tutors, who are parents from the school community or licensed teachers, deliver a culturally responsive program designed to accelerate literacy and foster an academic mindset. Students meet 1:1 or 1:2 with reading tutors for 30 minutes, three times per week for 30 weeks of the school year. Students who complete a full year in the program make an average gain of 1.6 years of reading skills and 32 words per minute in reading fluency.

During the 2015-16 school year Reading Results served 500 students. In 2016-17 the organization will serve 620 students. Though this is strong growth, it's still less than 20% of the 3,600 students in the program's current service area who need and deserve extra support to reach grade-level reading benchmarks.

The only organization of its kind in the country, **The Shadow Project** teams with teachers in 35 schools to make school more accessible and engaging for children with learning challenges, so they can achieve their full potential. The organization prioritizes serving Title I schools and is committed to equity, diversity and inclusion. This year, the organization will also pilot services at a regional Head Start facility. By equipping classrooms with innovative tools and strategies tailored to diverse learning needs, Shadow has helped foster success for more than 10,000 students who typically read 1 to 3 years below grade level due to disabilities such as dyslexia, ADHD, and autism. Teachers use Shadow's goal-setting program to build student confidence,

## Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

motivation and strong academic habits. In 2015, the organization created Oregon's first SuperSensory Literacy Spaces, where audio libraries make books come alive for discouraged readers, and students access sensory tools that improve self-regulation and focus. Finally, Shadow engages families in using these audio and sensory tools at home. In a 2016 survey, 97% of participating K-3 teachers reported that having Shadow as a resource strengthens their ability to increase 3rd grade reading proficiency.

Founded in 1992, **SMART (Start Making A Reader Today)®** is a nationally recognized, statewide nonprofit organization with a network of volunteers, educators, donors and advocates across Oregon working together to empower children for more successful futures through books and reading. SMART volunteers read one-

on-one with PreK through third-grade students for an hour each week during the school year, providing a fun, culturally affirming and child-guided experience with books. Laser-focused on increasing reading engagement and motivation, SMART's program is founded upon leading research that proves shared book-reading and availability of books in the home are key ingredients in a child's literacy development.

Last year alone, SMART served over 10,000 students through 5,000 volunteers who read with students in over 260 Title I elementary schools, pre-schools and Head Start programs. Educators, parents, and independent studies report overwhelmingly positive outcomes for SMART students, including improvements in reading fluency, vocabulary, interest in learning, and grade-appropriate reading performance. Recent surveys revealed that 87% of educators with SMART programs at their schools believe SMART contributed to increased reading motivation and enjoyment for students. Among parents, 94% indicated their children benefited significantly from SMART. Additionally, SMART was recognized nationally as a pioneer in early literacy when the organization received the 2014 American Prize for Literacy from the Library of Congress.



In 2011, the Harvard Business School Association of Oregon conducted a study of **The Shadow Project's** Social Return on Investment (SROI). The study found that every dollar invested in The Shadow Project returns at least \$26 in benefits to students served and to the community. The report praised the organization's "proven track record of improving outcomes" and "low cost, easily implemented" program.

# Accelerating Progress for Oregon's Youngest Readers: A Case for Investing in Community Partners

## Together, we are delivering collective, broad-based efforts for children 0-8.

When books are readily available at home, children spend more time reading—with their parents or on their own—developing the literacy skills needed to succeed in school. This in turn leads to improved education for all students, higher literacy and graduation rates, and stronger communities. The unfortunate reality, though, is that low-income children are far less likely to have books at home than their middle- or upper-income peers, leading to lost opportunities in early brain development and educational outcomes. Every year, **The Children's Book Bank** narrows the “book gap” for 8,500 young Oregonians by moving 100,000 new and gently-used children's books off shelves and into hands and homes of families. Through partnerships with low-income focused programs such as Head Start, community health clinics and social service agencies, thousands of toddlers and pre-schoolers who might not otherwise have books of their own each receive thoughtfully assembled collections of 14 “read aloud” picture books. With this infusion of engaging books, families double the total time spent reading, strengthen bonds between parent and child, increase pre-reading skills, and heighten curiosity and excitement for books. In addition, every June, thousands of school-age children at high-needs schools “shop” for eight self-selected books to take home and enjoy, resulting in more time spent reading over summer vacation and maintenance of reading skills gained during the school year. By engaging thousands of volunteers, book donors, and supporters in its work each year, The Children's Book Bank not only does its work in a cost-effective way, but also leverages broad grassroots support and brings public attention to early literacy gaps.

## We are amplifying public investments with private, individual and in-kind support.

Here are just a few examples of the ways these organizations are leveraging multiple sources of support to serve children and families in a highly cost-effective way.

- The Children's Book Bank received just \$40,117 in revenue from government sources in fiscal year 2015-2016. Total resources for the year, including the value of donated children's books and more than 9,800 volunteer hours, came to nearly \$1 million. That means each public dollar is matched more than 20:1 by other investments.
- Just 10% of SMART's \$3.43M budget came from government sources in fiscal year 2016. So each public dollar is matched 9:1 by private sector, philanthropic, and individual donations.
- The Shadow Project will receive just 20% of its \$377,000 budget during this fiscal year from government sources, including from the school districts it serves. That means that each public dollar is matched more than 4:1 by investments from the private sector and from individuals.
- The MFS AARP Experience Corps program raises nearly half of its budget from private sources, amplifying the impact of public funds dedicated to literacy support in 10 elementary schools.
- The MFS Ready, Set, Go! Program raises nearly 40% of its \$459,964 budget from private sources, amplifying the impact of the public funds invested in serving families at four sites.



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## A Collective Impact Experiment: Working Together for Early Literacy Success

In 2014-2015, Portland Public Schools engaged eight community partners, including five ELSA members, in the “Read Together” Initiative.<sup>19</sup> This collaborative effort provided supportive services to PreK-3rd grade students, families, and educators at five high-needs schools. Intended to create collective impact, the pilot project’s strategies included strengthening family and community involvement, increasing professional development support for teachers, providing high-interest, culturally relevant books for homes and classrooms, expanding children’s opportunities to read one-on-one with adults, and adding intensive school-day reading intervention for students lagging behind their peers. Each of the eight partners brought specific resources and expertise to the schools, and collected data about both outputs and outcomes.

At the end of the school year, the Read Together schools slightly outperformed comparison schools in maintaining or advancing progress toward grade-level reading benchmarks (as measured by DIBELS).

These examples illustrate that we have resources to solve the problem, but these resources must be supported and scaled up to meet the need. Private support and small public investments are already yielding progress. What we are asking for is for this work to be recognized and more systematically supported across the state so that a greater number of children in a greater number of places can benefit.

## CONCLUSIONS

Oregon, like many states, is struggling to raise both its third-grade reading achievement and its high school graduation rate. These two critical learning benchmarks are inextricably intertwined. An increase in child poverty, changing racial demographics, rapid gentrification, and job losses in the rural parts of our state all create demand for intensive supports for some groups of children before they enter school as well as in the early grades. The significant achievement gaps that are showing up between Oregon’s lower- and higher-income students – as well as for children of color, English-language learners, and children with special needs – demand our attention as urgent equity issues.

Fortunately, there are many bright spots on the horizon. The 16 Early Learning Hubs created in 2013 are improving, expanding, and coordinating service to young children across the state. The legislature’s 2015 investments in high-quality pre-school are another step toward making sure that more low-income children enter kindergarten ready to learn. These investments create frameworks, including a clearly articulated set of outcomes, that can encourage increased coordination among the systems currently serving children before school begins, in the transition to kindergarten, and in the early grades.

The state also has rich, underutilized resources represented by high-impact community literacy programs serving both pre-school and school-age children. These organizations specifically focus on groups of children and families that are currently underserved, failing to reach critical early learning benchmarks, and highlighting glaring gaps in equity. Reach Out and Read, SMART, and the public libraries are three ELSA



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members already working statewide; these organizations represent significant infrastructure through which new investments could serve more young children. Proven local models offered by Black Parent Initiative, The Children's Book Bank, Latino Network, MFS, Reading Results, and The Shadow Project are poised to expand service or to partner with others to replicate successful efforts.

Existing joint efforts offer just a few examples of ways to serve more children. These include:

- The Portland Public Schools (PPS) Read Together Initiative, bringing multiple types of school-day and wrap-around service into a group of high-need schools;
- The Children's Book Bank's partnerships with Latino Network's *Juntos Aprendemos*, Black Parent Initiative, Head Start and other pre-school providers, and schools;
- MFS's Ready, Set, Go! kindergarten readiness program provided in English and Spanish; and
- School-day supports such as Reading Results reading intervention sessions, MFS's Experience Corps program, or The Shadow Project's specialized resources and professional development for teachers working with special needs students.

All of these are getting results for the children they serve – and reaching only a fraction of those who could benefit.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

State and district leaders, elected officials at all levels, and philanthropic investors can all play a role alongside community leaders to renew and deepen commitments to ensuring all children 0-8 get the access, resources, and support they need to become proficient readers, writers, and learners. We offer these recommendations, and welcome your feedback on other ways to move forward together.

- **CONSULT LEADERS OF LITERACY-FOCUSED COMMUNITY PROGRAMS**, including but not limited to members of the Early Literacy Success Alliance, when making decisions affecting literacy policy and practice. Community leaders serving children most affected by inequity, and most at risk of not meeting key learning benchmarks, have important perspectives to share. Their day-to-day interactions with children, families, and educators; their specific programmatic expertise; and the evidence they're collecting about program impact can all inform discussions about effective investments in closing the current gaps in early learning success and school achievement.
- **DEMONSTRATE THAT LITERACY IS A COMMUNITY PRIORITY**. Through policy, practice, and public statements, promote holistic support for children's literacy development from ages 0-8 as a critical pathway to ensuring all children start kindergarten ready to learn, achieve reading proficiency in the early grades, close the current opportunity and achievement gaps between groups of students, raise Oregon's high school graduation rate, and create a stronger economic future for all Oregon families.

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- **INVEST IN WHAT'S WORKING.** Many community-based literacy programs, even smaller ones, are investing in formative and summative evaluation with the help of higher education institutions or organizations like Education Northwest. They're also designing and developing their programs with attention to existing research and best practices. State agencies, school districts, and private philanthropy can therefore invest with confidence in local programs that have proven strategies and are ready to serve more children in need. Further, leaders from all sectors can support continued investments in collecting and analyzing data that help everyone learn more about what's working best for which children and families.
- **CREATE A POOL OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FUNDING** that allows for greater investment in the kinds of evidence-based, specialized literacy support that community-based organizations and culturally-specific programs can provide for subgroups of students who are struggling.
- **EXPAND ELIGIBILITY TO COMPETE FOR PUBLIC FUNDING.** Building on the success of the Early Learning Hubs, enable the use of public funds – federal, state, and local– to directly support evidence-based early literacy interventions that community organizations provide. Give particular attention to organizations and programs focused on closing achievement gaps for children of color, children with disabilities, and low-income children to create a more equitable Oregon.

The organizations that collaborated on this paper welcome feedback and input. Our goal is to gather greater public support for and investment in changing the inequities that are affecting our state's youngest readers. Together, we can ensure that all of Oregon's children—across social, economic and racial strata—receive the access, support and resources they need to succeed in reading and learning. We want to extend special thanks to Social Venture Partners Portland for making the development of this paper possible.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Downloaded from <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?=5387> on 08/05/2016.
2. Also called the Nation's Report Card, NAEP is "the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas." The most recent data is for 2015. The proficient benchmark is defined in part as defined in part as "solid academic performance for each grade assessed." For more information, see <http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>. Selected information also appears in the Oregon Statewide Report Card 2014-2015.
3. See, for example, "Nation Falls Far Short on Educational Equity," in Education Week, published on line March 21, 2014 (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/03/21/26ocr.h33.html>); and the 2015 Stanford University study described here: <http://news.stanford.edu/2015/04/15/discipline-black-students-041515/>.
4. See footnote 2.
5. "Students with disabilities" is a term used by the US Department of Education and by the Oregon Department of Education to describe children and youth who receive special education services for a wide variety of conditions, the most common being a specific learning disability (such as dyslexia). The Shadow Project uses the term "learning challenges" rather than "disabilities" when describing students they serve.
6. 2015 fact sheet downloaded from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2015/pdf/2016008OR4.pdf>
7. 2013 Fact Sheet, downloaded from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2013/pdf/2014464OR4.pdf>
8. 2016 data brief, downloaded from <http://www.gradnation.org/report/2016-building-grad-nation-data-brief>
9. Downloaded from [http://www.gradnation.org/sites/default/files/civic\\_2016\\_full\\_report\\_FNL2-2\\_0.pdf](http://www.gradnation.org/sites/default/files/civic_2016_full_report_FNL2-2_0.pdf)
10. See, for example, the Unsettling Profile series from the Coalition of Communities of Color. Profiles for specific communities available here: <http://www.coalitioncommunitiescolor.org/research-data-tools/?category=Unsettling+Profile+Series>
11. Downloaded from <http://www.cffo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CFFO-Progress-Report.pdf>
12. Based on ODE fall membership counts at <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?=3225>.
13. Thirty Million Words Initiative, <http://thirtymillionwords.org/tmw-initiative/>, citing Hart & Risley (1996); Children's Book Bank, <http://www.childrensbookbank.org/research/>, citing multiple studies.
14. Reach Out and Read Fact Sheet: <http://www.reachoutandread.org/media/46483/roronpaperfinal11.18.13.pdf>
15. Reported February 9, 2016, on line at [http://www.oregonlive.com/education/index.ssf/2016/02/oregon\\_kindergartners\\_arrived.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/education/index.ssf/2016/02/oregon_kindergartners_arrived.html)
16. Hernandez, Donald J. Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012.
17. The Graduation Effect (downloaded from <http://impact.all4ed.org/#or/increased-investment/all-students>)
18. Reported in The Oregonian on line, July 21, 2015, [http://www.oregonlive.com/education/index.ssf/2015/07/lagging\\_education\\_for\\_latinos.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/education/index.ssf/2015/07/lagging_education_for_latinos.html); and referencing this report from EcoNorthwest: <http://www.econw.com/our-work/publications/achievement-gap-impacts-in-oregon-and-the-portland-area>.
19. See a description on the Portland Public Schools web site here: [http://www.pps.net/cms/lib8/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/184/Read\\_Together\\_English.pdf](http://www.pps.net/cms/lib8/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/184/Read_Together_English.pdf)