

# Philadelphia as a Literacy-Rich Environment: Unlocking Potential and Creating Change

Launched in 2015, the William Penn Foundation's Literacy-Rich Environments (LRE) Initiative activated a diverse array of learning partners across the city of Philadelphia to infuse literacy-rich opportunities and experiences in informal learning settings and everyday spaces. Children and families engage in literacy exploration and practice throughout their days – waiting for the bus or their doctor, playing in the park, visiting a museum or library, or attending an afterschool program. Central to the LRE Initiative was a commitment to evaluation, peer learning, and collaboration, so the Foundation engaged The Learning Agenda to facilitate a Community of Practice (CoP) among the LRE grantee partners.

While much of the work to create a literacy-rich ecosystem in Philadelphia is still underway, LRE partners are learning what it takes to create and scale literacy-rich environments as one of many strategies for supporting early literacy development. **Reflecting on their work together, the LRE CoP partners identified five insights that unpack the city-level conditions needed for creating and scaling literacy-rich environments:**

- 1. Be inclusive of all the potential places and people that can contribute to a literacy-rich ecosystem.** This means recognizing the full complement of a city's youth- and family-serving institutions, such as government agencies, schools, community-based organizations, libraries, art museums, parks, laundromats, barber shops, etc.
- 2. Activate literacy-rich environments in the places and spaces where children and their caregivers naturally are or want to be.** Grocery stores, parks and playgrounds, barbershops, pediatricians' offices, health centers, bus stops, laundromats, and government and social services offices are some of the many places where children and their caregivers spend time during their day that are ripe for being transformed into fun places to practice literacy skills.
- 3. Co-create literacy-rich environments with family and community members.** Engaging families and community members in co-creating literacy-rich environments means they can be active participants in the design and evaluation of literacy experiences that are culturally relevant and meaningful to them while ensuring that designers and evaluators are centering community ideas in their work.
- 4. Embrace a broad range of outcomes across your literacy-rich environment ecosystem.** While skills acquisition is important to measure in some contexts, the primary goal of the LRE projects in Philadelphia was to expand the conditions that contribute to the ultimate goal of improved literacy. Namely, increased engagement in literacy activities that develop critical non-academic skills, increased staff knowledge and skills to create and implement literacy programs, improved caregiver knowledge and attitudes about learning opportunities, and increased quantity and quality of caregiver and child language use.
- 5. Maximize collaboration, networking, and shared learning.** When organizations collaborate, they can amplify the work of each partner, leveraging each other's strengths so that their collective impact creates and sustains literacy-rich environments across the city in a way no one single organization could.



## What Funders Can Do

Collectively, the five insights gleaned from the LRE CoP members call on funders and other key decision-makers to take five actions to ensure that literacy-rich environments are created and scaled in ways that render them an essential part of a comprehensive, citywide solution to improving literacy:

- 1. Rethink traditional approaches to grantmaking to allow for meaningful community engagement.** This means multiyear funding with sufficient planning time to meaningfully engage community members, who are compensated for their time.
- 2. Invest and engage in community-centered evaluation,** which places the needs, interests, and concerns of the community being evaluated at the forefront of the evaluation process.
- 3. Think systemically about the constellation of grants across a city to create a literacy-rich environment ecosystem.** If funders want to infuse the landscape with literacy-rich environments, it is important to think about how to fund and incentivize partnerships and networks so grantees see themselves as part of a symbiotic system of supports aimed at creating and sustaining literacy-rich environments across a city.
- 4. Educate stakeholders on the value of play.** For literacy-rich environments to take hold in a community, it is essential for key stakeholders who are in a position to fund and implement literacy-rich environments to understand that play is a necessary part of holistic child development, cultivating the breadth of skills children need to be effective, engaged learners.
- 5. Embrace a theory of change that recognizes the multifaceted nature of supporting literacy.** Communities that are striving to have a robust literacy-rich environment ecosystem need broadly scoped theories of change that include a variety of strategies working together toward the ultimate outcome of improved literacy.



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Full Brief:

