

Continuum of Progress for Battle Creek to Consider

A comprehensive, community-based approach to Community Literacy involves a complex set of issues, tasks, and participants. We have referred to this as the “Continuum of Progress.” There are specific signposts along this continuum which are applicable for all communities seeking to make progress in significantly improving overall literacy. The important organizer of a community’s action is to determine where on the continuum the community presently sits and to apply resources to propel progress from that point. For Battle Creek to succeed at this work, the community will need to value connecting resources, efforts and intent for optimal outcomes. The need to cross boundaries is paramount. In order to achieve a collaborative system across public, nonprofit and family constituencies, Battle Creek will need to determine where each investment is optimized and should develop a capacity to maintain and challenge this dynamic system. Battle Creek should consider the following steps as its Community Literacy “Continuum of Progress:”

1. Decide, “What is Your Community” and “What is Community Literacy”

The community examples researched for this report have demonstrated that the size of the “community” that can come together to address Community Literacy can vary from a single neighborhood to a city or an entire county. Population is a consideration here. But many other factors may impact the decision of where to implement the community-based approach: where are the rates particularly high, who is willing to collaborate, what geographic area do the three constituents (parents, schools, community services) consider their “community,” what will grant/funder opportunities support, what are the school district boundaries, and so on.

2. Make an Assessment of Present Effort

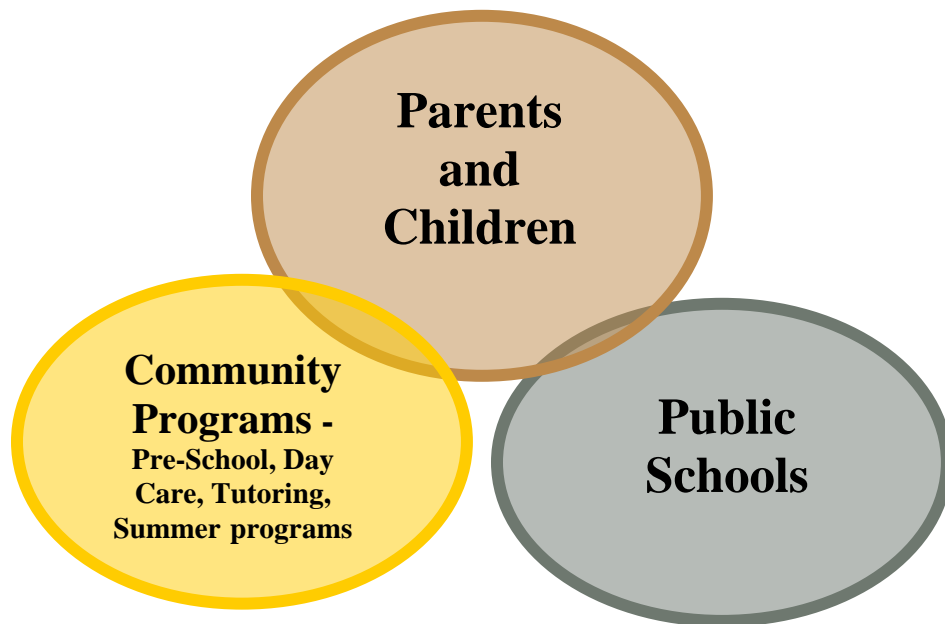
A community then develops an asset map of all present programs. Attention should be paid to demographic and geographical alignment. There will be a requirement for mapping present markers of success/need – MEAP and SES, etc. Once this community data is developed, a rigorous assessment should be undertaken by the community. Key questions include: Are there anomalies – for example, do similarly positioned schools have dramatically different outcomes? Does resource allocation align with need? Have there been significant performance changes over time? And so forth. The most significant value of community data is that it can bring clarity and, thus, serves to engage the community around an aspiration to improve.

3. Engage the Community

One of the primary purposes of community engagement is to find out how parents, schools, service providers, and community leaders feel about the issues surrounding Community Literacy and about the community's present response to the problem. In order to have a genuine community-based approach, residents must believe in and support the effort. Programs that operate without the buy-in of the community are less effective: organizations find it harder to collaborate when their Boards, staffs or funders aren't fully committed to the shared outcome. A truly community-based effort will reflect the many components and values within the community while presenting a united front of commitment and dialogue. Through meetings, events, collaborative programs, media campaigns, and lots of talking, community members can begin to build a shared vision for where they want to go with this effort and what their literacy expectations should/can be.

4. Form a Partnership among Public Schools and the Community

As research has shown, Public Elementary School outcomes represent the consolidated results of the entire community literacy effort. The schools are not the sole responsible agent. With as much as a third of a child's literacy future established before they even walk through the kindergarten door, school-community partnerships prepare those future students for success. If the model of the school-on-an-island was ever successful, it is no longer. .



Communities which are significantly improving their literacy are directing their discretionary resources to pre-school, after-school and summer efforts which prepare for and reinforce public school efforts

5. Be very Intentional about Adult Literacy Efforts.

a. To enhance the learning environment for early learners by supporting their parents' education efforts. Research indicates that multi-generation (child-parent-grandparent) strategies for improving literacy are more effective than are programs focusing on just adults or just students. Thus efforts to improve the education and literacy levels of the adults in children's lives lead to stronger literacy skills for everybody.

b. To enhance adults' and teens' job skills. Engage the business community ... a skilled and literate work force is a competitive advantage for job and employer recruiting. Key partners here would be employers, Economic Development Collaboratives (local and state) and Chamber(s) of Commerce.

6. Attend to Diversity at Every Step

While a comprehensive approach must serve the whole community, culturally relevant strategies to community literacy can improve effectiveness with diverse populations. In addition, media campaigns, announcements, parent workshops, and evaluation tools may all need to be tailored to different cultures, world views, and languages.

7. Create a Continuum of Youth Literacy Services: Summer and After School

When choosing and implementing multiple strategies to address the complexity of this issue, communities should consider creating a continuum of summer services that addresses children and parents at various points in their development—from the information needs of young parents, to the skill-building needs of early elementary students, to the more complex, multi-topic critical literacy skills teens need, to the job-related literacy skills of the work force. A continuum of services is the most likely to reach the needs students of all ages before they drop out of high-school or fail to gain proficient literacy skills. As the community considers its' allocation of resources, one point to consider is that efforts early in students' lives tend to be more effective than efforts offered later. Thus summer school offered to kindergarteners or first graders will tend to be more effective in preventing academic failure than will efforts that focus on remediating teens' underachievement.

8. Make the Effort Last Forever

A major weakness with past and current community-based literacy programs is that they are often designed without mechanisms to ensure sustainability. But developing community literacy can have no end date. While successful communities have worked to institutionalize programs—finding various permanent organizations within which to house strategies—most communities do not have a lasting structure to monitor programs or new issues in the community that impact literacy. The most successful communities have used advisory or governance boards to oversee some aspects of the community effort.

A long-term commitment to comprehensive, community-based literacy improvement requires ongoing oversight at the community level, whether that means a permanent

governing body, a few permanent staff, a regularly updated report of trends and program evaluations, and/or a community historian to maintain records of past and current progress.

9. Keep Track of What's Working and What's Needed

Without adequate, ongoing evaluation of literacy outcomes, it is not possible for the community to know which programs are working, where it sits on the “Continuum of Progress” or what additional needs exist. Based on the experiences of other communities, two realms of evaluation are advisable: (1) a program-level feedback loop, where participants’ responses to programs are solicited and outcomes are documented; (2) a system-level meta-analysis of the community’s response that addresses issues such as emerging gaps in service, changes in the community’s assessed literacy rate, and efforts to sustain funding and community engagement. Tracking efforts must be on outcomes (e.g., reading assessment scores) – not resource allocation (e.g., number of participants). We must raise our expectations beyond increasing numbers served and ask whether, for example, reading and writing levels have improved.

10. Establish the Infrastructure to Accomplish These Recommendations

A comprehensive, community-based approach to literacy—or any other social problem in your community—is going to require a supportive infrastructure to get the work done and make the effort last. This is especially true since we are talking about achieving outcomes across traditional boundaries. From our research on community literacy and on many other issues, we strongly recommend the creation of a “community support organization” to coordinate and sustain the community literacy effort and then to serve other comprehensive efforts to address social problems in the community.

As a neutral, intermediary body with permanent staff, the community support organization would be able to convene the community meetings about literacy, facilitate discussions, develop agency networks, help raise money, ensure ongoing evaluation, and hold the community to high aspirations throughout the process. Permanent staff would be dedicated to keeping the effort progressing, sustaining it over the long term, and connecting it to other systemic issues in the community such as youth development and health. With a community support organization, Battle Creek would have a permanent location in which to house the local advisory body on community literacy (which might also be an advisory body for other issues, further reducing duplication) as well as the long-term attention that this issue deserves. In addition, the learning and networks resulting from the community literacy effort would not be lost over time, and could feed into other issues that also require coordinated, community-wide attention.

However Battle Creek decides to proceed, you should not be afraid to admit that comprehensive approaches to community literacy prevention are challenging on many levels—from the sensitivity of the problem, to the complexity of the issue, to the conflicts that can arise, to the logistical challenges of bringing together so many people and programs. A community support organization can help minimize these challenges, while allowing your community and its youth to experience the benefits of success.

Data from the Community

Organization

In this section, the data provided by the Battle Creek Community is presented. First, we have reorganized the data provided on the Excel spreadsheet according to the type of resources. These include:

1. All programs for which we have data
2. Programs serving preschool-age children and their families
3. Parent and child programs
4. Elementary School programs
5. ESL Programs
6. Adult Literacy Programs
7. Other Community Literacy Programs

The second are the resource maps. These maps show the location of the various community services available within the Battle Creek Area. Resources not on the map are indicated by arrows.

1. Map 1 presents the elementary schools' locations using a text box. The first number in the text box represents the percentage of students meeting or exceeding 4th grade MEAP reading standards. This serves as our marker for the general neighborhood literacy levels (with the assumption that Battle Creek has neighborhood schools). The second number is the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. This serves as our marker for the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood and school. We also provide a key that provides these data in table form.
2. Map 2 provides the location of the Parent and child programs.
3. Map 3 provides the location of the Elementary School-Age programs
4. Map 4 provides the location of the ESL Programs
5. Map 5 provides the location of the Adult Literacy Programs
6. Map 6 provides the location of other community-based literacy programs that did not fall into one of the categories.

How to Use These Data

Use these data to review the resources that are already in place. Are they where they need to be? Are there enough resources of the right variety given the specific characteristics of the neighborhood? How effective do these resources seem to be with regard to target outcomes?

For example, our initial impression is that Preschool, Day Care and Elementary school programs are well distributed and appear to be where they are needed. However, based on the widely varying performance across neighborhoods, some of these resources appear to be more effective than others. It will be important to understand why community literacy levels vary from neighborhood to neighborhood and which resources appear to be supporting high literacy levels. With this information in hand, less effective resources can be converted to assets and more effective resources can act as models.