Pacesetter Criterion 1

Cook County Family Connection is a collaborative partnership working to improve early language and literacy in rural impoverished Cook County, Georgia. Our 40 partners represent diverse sectors of the local community, including schools and colleges, child care providers, public agencies, private businesses, health care providers, civic clubs, faith-based groups, government and literacy advocates. While the overarching goal of our work is to improve health equity across the community, our partners understand that 40 percent of community health is determined by socioeconomic and educational factors. Consequently, we realize that early language and literacy are critical components that must be addressed in order to improve the overall health of our community.

Our collaborative has implemented several strategies during the past two years to begin promoting and supporting literacy and learning. Our mobile produce truck delivers free fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income children each month, and we now include a storybook for each child with those produce deliveries. Believing that all children should be well-fed and well-read, we are using this produce delivery system to increase access to age-appropriate literacy materials. With funding from state literacy partners, we have created three Lobby Library projects where free books, educational supplies and reading materials are available to families on a daily basis. Because we recognize that many impoverished families do not have access to literacy materials, children and families can select books to take home with them as gifts (not loaned materials). These Lobby Library projects are housed in the public lobby areas of our local Coastal Plain Community Action Agency, Department of Family & Children Services Agency and Adel First Baptist Church Community Food Pantry — three sites that specifically serve low-income and marginalized families.

We also distribute free books and literacy materials to children and families through community events. For example, we recently co-hosted a Migrant Family Education Day at a local school and over 200 migrant families visited to learn about available services, programs and educational opportunities. During this event, we distributed over 350 free books to encourage reading among these children and families. Our collaborative also pursues supplemental literacy funding that we share with our partner agencies so they can purchase books and learning materials. During the past few months, we have donated funding to three local child care centers that serve predominantly low-income and minority children. We recently served as the lead partner in a joint grant-writing effort.
that resulted in an $80,000 literacy grant to be shared between our collaborative, Cook Primary School, the Boys & Girls Club and Candy Cane’s Learning Center.

As part of our continual social media campaign, we publish weekly Facebook postings to share literacy research and resources and to saturate our readers with consistent messages promoting literacy. On average, we reach about 1,500 readers per month with social media messaging, plus an additional 150 local, regional and state stakeholders through internal email blasts.

Cook County Family Connection leaders have assumed lead roles as literacy advocates by partnering with various regional and state organizations. We serve on the regional Early Education Empowerment Zone Leadership Team; and we are a project grantee under the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, the Sandra Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy at Georgia College, and the Literacy For All Fund. Understanding the significance of empowering our partners to serve as literacy leaders, we provided funding during the past year for four partners to participate in the Georgia Governor’s Literacy Summit, five partners to participate in literacy technical assistance sessions and 18 leaders to participate in a Literacy and Poverty summit.

Our collaborative compiles and publishes an Annual Community Health Assessment Report, which includes detailed data on literacy and education, and we make frequent public presentations to civic clubs, faith groups, business associations, school groups, etc. In summary, our collaborative has evolved into “the community voice” for early language and literacy in Cook County. Through a diverse and community-driven collaborative process, our leaders believe that we can begin to change the culture of Cook County so that language, literacy, and learning become priorities within the political, economic, educational and social systems in our community. A child’s potential, imagination and educational possibilities should not be inequitable because of where they live…children born into poor families in rural Deep South Georgia should have the same access and opportunities to read and learn as those children born into prosperous families in cities rich with resources. Cook County Family Connection partners are working to bridge that chasm by making literacy and learning accessible for all children.
Pacesetter Criterion 2

Cook County is a small rural community with a long history of persistent poverty and literacy disparities. About 25 percent of all adults have less than a high school education; one of every four babies are born to a mother with fewer than 12 years of education; and less than 43 percent of our students are reading proficiently by the end of third grade. The Cook County Family Connection collaborative is working to change these and other dynamics by leading a community-based effort to identify and address the disparities, inequities and barriers that foster these problems.

Our collaborative has recently completed a six-month process of community assessment to determine our three top priorities in developing a Community Health Improvement Plan for Cook County. After months of data collection, reviews of needs and assets, environmental and geographic scans, our collaborative partners overwhelmingly identified Literacy and Education as the top priority for our community-based efforts (followed by Healthy Environments and Access to Health Care). The fact that 40 community partners from diverse sectors assigned top priority to improving literacy indicates that we have established a shared common vision where leaders understand and prioritize the significance of early education.

As we begin to implement our five-year strategic plan to improve community health, improved literacy and education efforts will be steering various components of that plan. As part of the community assessment process, our leaders dug deeper to examine data and disparities by geographic areas and census tracts. The purpose of this analysis is to assist our collaborative partners in identifying neighborhoods and areas where specific outreach and targeted efforts are needed. For example, we now know that the small community of Cecil in the southernmost part of our county has the highest rates of children, ages 3-4, who are not enrolled in early childhood education. As a result, our partners from the Early Education Empowerment Zone and preschool providers can begin targeting these neighborhoods to provide information and encouragement for families to enroll their children in education programs.

Another example is how these data reveal that an area on the western side of our county has disproportionate numbers of parents with less than 12 years of education — which, of course, contributes to the educational progress of their children. This revelation allows our partners from Wiregrass Technical College, Adult Education and GED programs to concentrate outreach efforts in these specific neighborhoods. In other words, our collaborative is actively using local literacy data as a roadmap to guide our strategic efforts. Our collaborative work around literacy has allowed us to win three literacy grant awards during 2017–2018 from state-level funders: Literacy For All, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, and the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement.
That funding has/is being used to expand access to books and educational materials for over 2,000 low-income children across our community. This has been accomplished through various strategies, including our Lobby Library projects, monthly produce and book deliveries, and book distribution events. Funding is also being used to build capacity and leadership among our collaborative partners so that they are empowered and mobilized to serve as advocates and leaders for improved literacy across the community.

During the past year, at least half of our 40 partners have been directly engaged in literacy and education activities whether distributing books, reading to children in classrooms, promoting literacy at community events or spearheading marketing campaigns around literacy. Through our social media and marketing efforts, our collaborative reaches over 1,500 individuals monthly with data, research findings, resource information and literacy opportunities. Through a process that includes community-based collaboration, literacy advocacy and leadership, expanded access to books and continual reinforcement of literacy messaging, our collaborative is using multiple strategies to build a new culture of literacy in Cook County.