

# Changing the Trajectory: Communities Take Action to Increase Reading Proficiency

## Eight is too late

Reading is the foundation of success in school, the workplace and civic life. Yet, despite Massachusetts' reputation as a national leader in education, 43% of third graders are not able to read proficiently, a critical predictor of their future success. Among children from low-income families, 65% are not proficient readers. Research is clear: these children will continue to struggle in school and in life. They are four times less likely than their grade-level peers to graduate from high school on time.

The fact that these rates have remained stagnant for more than a decade is not surprising. Too often, the policy response has been to wait until kindergarten—or even third grade—to intervene. This is too late. Learning begins at birth, and the path to reading success begins long before third grade.

“The stark reality is that **50% of our children are at a 2% or 3% proficiency rate.** This is appalling by any measure or test. Holyoke is doing poorly. Bottom line, we need to come together as a community and help our children learn to read.”

*P. Hryy-Dermith, Holyoke Public Schools*

## Communities can catalyze change

Strategies for Children (SFC) seeks to change this trajectory for young children and to ensure they have the foundation to be successful in school and in life. SFC has spent a decade developing and monitoring research-based public policies and advocating for the effective and accountable investment of public and private funds. Yet to achieve its mission, SFC knows that state policy development alone is not sufficient. To impact sustainable and systemic outcomes for children, policy must be aligned with community-level data and action. Local, coordinated, and cross-sector community efforts are collectively in the best position to address and support the needs of children and families, as well as those of the adults working with them. However, communities face three major challenges:

1. **The birth to eight (B-8) landscape is segmented and fragmented.** Education is defined in age or setting brackets—0-3, PreK, or K-3—with each sector clamoring for limited resources. Compounding this challenge, within the birth through five continuum alone, there are multiple early education delivery systems. The result is that a child moves through a disjointed, uncoordinated series of programs and supports.
2. **Well-intentioned philanthropic efforts focus on short term funding cycles.** Often, grants issued span one to two years. The result is an unstable short-term funding base undermining the effort needed to produce long-term outcomes.
3. **Literacy programs and supports often lack a sustained intensive approach.** The result is a bevy of programs focused on spreading information but not addressing the hard, intensive work necessary to support measurable growth.

To catalyze change and address these barriers, in 2012, SFC made the strategic decision to convene and support communities committed to ensuring that children have access to high-quality early education and become proficient readers by third grade. With an intentional process and support structure, SFC believed it could enable communities to align resources and drive action locally.

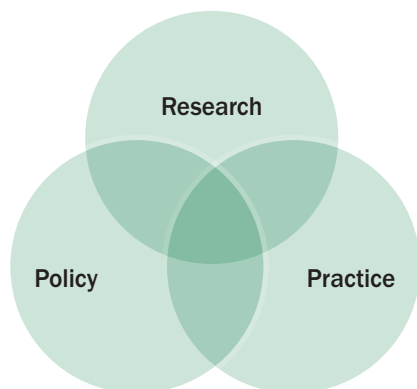
# Sustained Impact Requires Intentional Coordination and Alignment

## Community Action Must be Aligned with Both Research and Policy

To create systemic change, SFC ensured the alignment of research, policy, and practice. First, it leveraged its long-standing credibility with policymakers, the media, the business community and others; credibility established as a result of a strong record of legislative and early education policy successes.

It also gathered the research. In 2010 SFC commissioned a report from Nonie Lesaux, Ph.D., a nationally known expert on language development and literacy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to identify strategies to improve language and literacy success for children birth to age nine. *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success* articulates five critical action steps necessary to drive comprehensive reform for ensuring strong readers in the Commonwealth. This report served as the foundation and guiding framework for the community-level work.

Finally, to create lasting change SFC drove a dual focus on policy and practice. Providing a twofold focus fosters an understanding of scalable strategies from the local to state level and stimulates a path of momentum. In turn, this informs and propels state and national policy, creating new avenues to reading proficiency.



SFC also was in a unique position to align progress at the local and state levels with the national reform movement. At the same time the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR) launched, in partnership with the National League of Cities, an All American Cities Award focused on third grade reading proficiency. Interested communities were invited to form leadership teams and build Community Solution Action Plans (CSAP) in which they set reading proficiency targets and created B-8 literacy campaigns. SFC, the GLR Campaign partner in Massachusetts, helped several Massachusetts communities craft their CSAPs.

SFC leveraged this opportunity and created the nation's first Learning Network of communities: the Massachusetts Third Grade Reading Proficiency Learning Network (Learning Network). Together, the network's five founding members—Boston, Holyoke, Pittsfield, Springfield and Worcester—are home to more than 100,000 children, birth to age 9.

## Facilitated Peer Learning Expands Community Capacity

Community-level work is by its nature insular. Through the Learning Network, SFC leads communities in an unprecedented community-level birth through age 8 strategic planning process. Leaders from member communities pioneer comprehensive local planning and collaboration to advance reading proficiency rates. Participants support and gather feedback from other teams facing similar struggles, and receive customized research and technical support from SFC.

During its first year, SFC sought to partner with communities to:

- Ensure strategic and diverse composition of community leadership teams;
- Leverage initial progress in Community Solutions Action Plans (CSAPs);

### Language Matters

Intentional use of the word “community” rather than “district” played a key role in framing the B-8 conversation. Using “community” helped support and reiterate the critical nature of the B-8 work: collective, collaborative, and cross-sector. Conversely, using “district” often triggered the implication of a siloed and solitary effort involving only the public schools—one that possibly excluded other key community partners. Thus, to catalyze community change, language matters.

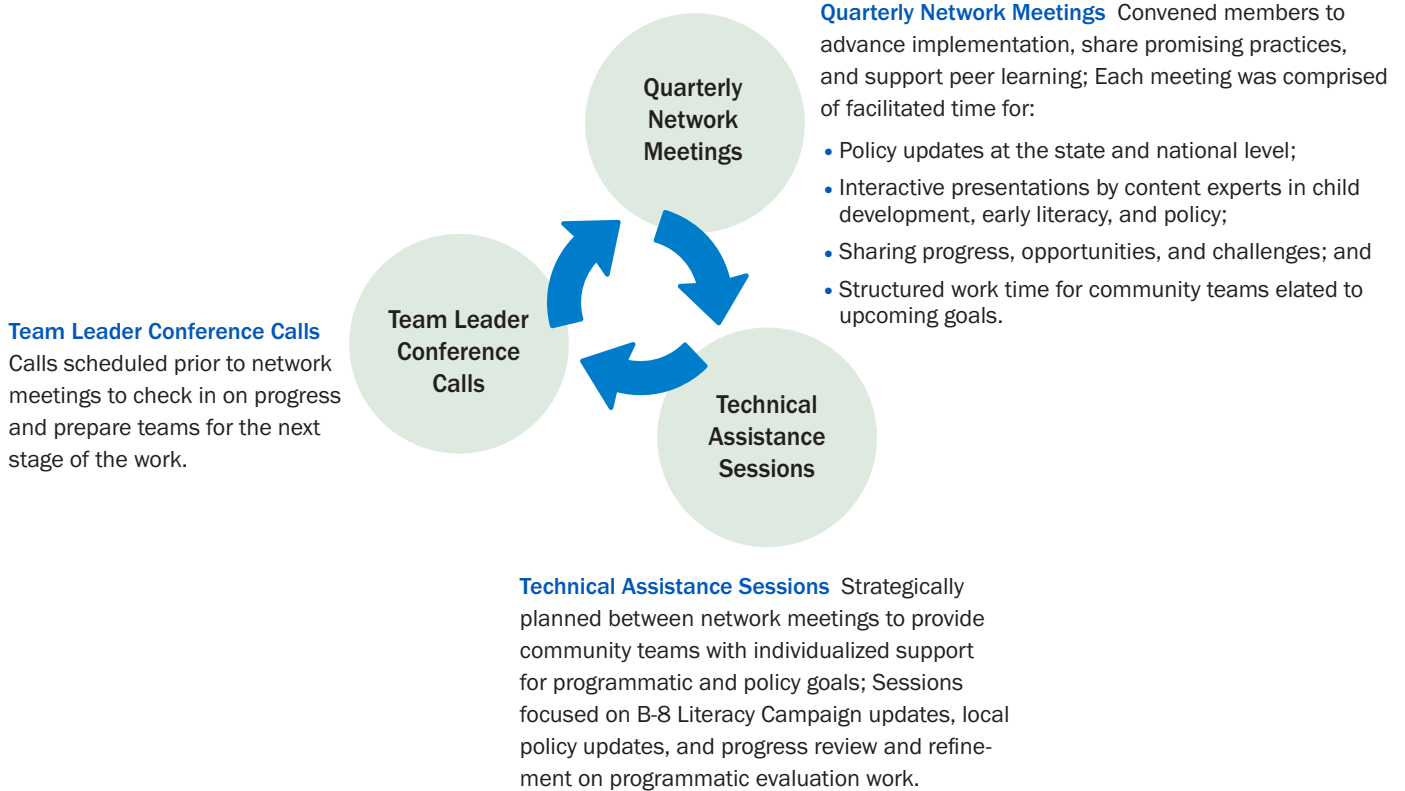
- Facilitate a process to analyze and refine literacy campaigns;
- Lead communities toward strategic choices of time, money and human capital;
- Ensure alignment between local implementation and state-level policy; and
- Take action—implement the refined plan.

### Team Composition

A successful and sustainable effort relies on a highly-qualified and diverse team. Without it, the strategic effort and implementation fall flat. To address this and the segmented nature of the programs/services serving young children, SFC worked with community teams to review their composition. Who wasn't at the table that should be? Whose voices were not represented? Teams needed diverse membership reflective of the collaborative nature of the B-8 arena; yet, they had to be small and nimble. Moreover, teams needed members who knew the community landscape and local political context. Often, the missing voices represented both the philanthropic sector and K-12 school district leadership. Team composition and revision continued to be critical throughout the year as turnover occurred. Knowing its importance, one community stepped out of the Network to focus on this coalition building that reflected stronger leadership and cross-sector representation.

### Cycle of Support

SFC designed a cycle of support to guide teams through their impact analysis.



### Key Members to Consider for an Ideal B-8 Team

#### School district personnel

- Superintendent
- Chief academic officer
- Principal
- Curriculum and instruction director
- Classroom teacher or instructional coach

#### Early Care and Education leaders

- Early learning administrator
- Members of early childhood advisory council
- Early educator

#### Community leaders

- Mayor/city staff
- Philanthropic representative
- Librarian
- Community-based directors of early childhood services

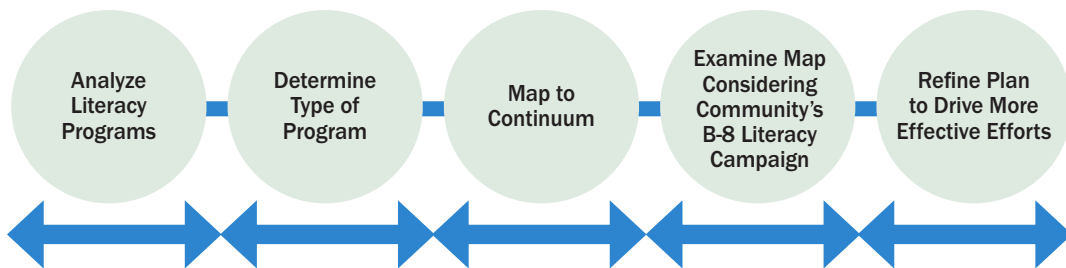
## All available resources—time, money, and human capital—must be intentionally deployed for both individual and collective impact

### Impact Analysis

The critical linchpin of creating systematic and sustainable efforts leading to children’s outcomes entails a comprehensive analysis of a community’s resource allocation—time, money, and human capital. To steer this examination, SFC developed an innovative impact analysis in partnership with Dr. Lesaux. This multi-stage process guided community teams as they strategically analyzed and revised their literacy campaigns, informed by both their CSAPs and the *Turning the Page* recommendations.

SFC/Lesaux provided key tools for communities to examine and synthesize local data on literacy programs and their funding sources. These tools:

- Provided an evaluation matrix for communities to chart their programmatic landscape;
- Shared key information to adjust and refine teams’ strategic plans and programmatic offerings;
- Established a common language and elevated the conversation around research-based concepts;
- Created an evaluative and impact-driven mindset.



The **Program Design Evaluation Tool (PDET)** is an innovative asset-mapping framework which analyzes the design and impact of local literacy programs along five key dimensions: (1) delivery, (2) target population, (3) dosage, (4) staff training, and (5) evaluation. These dimensions help plot a community’s programs along a continuum. At one end of the continuum are programs and activities that *raise awareness* by broadly spreading information and materials. At the other end lay programs and activities that *change behaviors*, those that build children’s literacy skills. Each type of program serves a distinct purpose. The PDET aided teams in identifying the purpose and impact of each program. Community teams then determined what mix of literacy programs and activities would collectively produce the greatest impact across the community and maximize the limited resources available.

The **Funding Analysis/Stability Index** guided teams to examine funding mechanisms by charting program costs, funding sources, and their characteristics. Communities reviewed the structure and sustainability of current funding. Often communities found a mismatch in funding stability and program outcomes. Program outcomes designed to change behaviors require greater sustained investment but were often funded alongside programs with broader “one size reaches many” outcomes.

“Pittsfield Promise is beginning to narrow the focus on programs that are going to be most impactful. Though awareness is still extremely important, **our goal is help move programs and activities towards changing behavior** by taking awareness to best practice.”

*K. Vogel, Pittsfield Promise*

## Systemic Change is Happening

After one year of engaging in this comprehensive and innovative effort, these four Massachusetts communities have:

- Refined strategic plans;
- Developed a comprehensive asset map of resources and outcomes;
- Created a profile of the public and private funding supporting those resources; and
- Determined an action plan for more effective and impactful resource allocation and coordination.

To solve complex social problems like stubbornly low reading proficiency rates, communities need to build deep, sustained collaborations that engage providers, programs, public schools, philanthropy, and policy makers to examine and redesign the literacy landscape. These four Massachusetts communities are charging forward to change the dialog, measure true impact, and make strategic choices about time, money and human capital. They have changed and are creating change:

- **Philanthropy** is implementing informed grant making reflective of impact;
- **Schools** are strengthening partnerships with communities;
- **Programs and budgets** are being carefully scrutinized to redirect resources into programs focused on outcomes; and
- **Campaigns** are engaging state legislators and local political leaders.

Other communities are lining up to change this alarming trajectory. They, too, realize systematic change requires resource and policy alignment. They, too, know that learning begins at birth and reading success begins long before third grade. And they, too, recognize the time to act is *now*.

### Resources

**Campaign for Grade-Level Reading**  
[www.gradelevelreading.net](http://www.gradelevelreading.net)

**National Governor's Association:**  
*A Governor's Guide to Early Literacy*  
[www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org)

**Strategies for Children**  
[www.strategiesforchildren.org](http://www.strategiesforchildren.org)

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## About Strategies for Children

Strategies for Children works to ensure that all children in Massachusetts have the foundation to take advantage of the rich educational and economic opportunities that our state has to offer. We focus our efforts on the critical early years from birth to third grade.

SFC leverages its core strengths in policy, advocacy, research, communications, constituency building, and practice to advance outcomes in three areas of focus:

- Ensure that all children have access to high-quality early education.
- Ensure that our children are entering elementary schools ready to succeed.
- Ensure that our children are proficient readers by the end of third grade.

For more information on the Massachusetts Third Grade Reading Proficiency Learning Network, contact Kelly Kulsrud, Director of Reading Proficiency at Strategies for Children, at [kkulsrud@strategiesforchildren.org](mailto:kkulsrud@strategiesforchildren.org).



# Massachusetts Third Grade Reading Proficiency Learning Network Key Learnings and Outcomes

What it Takes	Community Outcomes/Changes
<p><b>Resource analysis and defining measurable impact is a critical first step.</b> Assessing the current resources allocated in the B-8 arena and understanding the overall community landscape of the B-8 efforts provide a critical baseline and context for community-wide decision-making and ultimately, impact.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most community literacy-based efforts focus on raising awareness. A balanced approach includes this critical component but it cannot stop there. Awareness needs to set the stage for actions and interventions that change behaviors.</li> <li>• Many programs lacked impact measurements. Programs have become great at tracking inputs and outputs; yet they rarely measure the impact—the desired change in behavior, skills, and knowledge.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pittsfield re-balanced efforts in order to direct emphasis and resource allocation on literacy activities that were more effectively designed and delivered to improve child literacy outcomes in more impactful ways.</li> <li>• Boston recognized that they have committed professionals doing the work; yet programs and supports needed to increase accountability and to add aligned indicators</li> </ul>
<p><b>A highly-visible political leader must catalyze political will and awareness.</b> Having a local leader—a mayor, school committee member, city councilor, city manager or a selectman – publically leading and supporting the B-8 work is instrumental in driving resource allocation, building community momentum, developing unlikely and likely allies, and ensuring the issue stays on the political agenda.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Holyoke mayor has prioritized early literacy in his administration.</li> <li>• The long-standing Boston mayor laid the foundation for directing resources toward early literacy and created multiple literacy programs throughout the city. The new mayor has continued to prioritize the issue.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The interplay of program and policy work builds critical momentum.</b> Community leaders unanimously agreed that the policy thread in their work powered their B-8 literacy campaign strategies and programmatic efforts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SFC helped communities navigate local systems, brief state legislators, and connect local and state early education policies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Springfield has leveraged pending casino revenues to generate local early education and care investments.</li> <li>• Pittsfield and Springfield legislators championed third grade reading legislation that was enacted into law.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The philanthropic community must align &amp; sustain investments in programs with measureable impact.</b> Reading proficiency issues are entrenched, but with partnership and focused investment change is possible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funders should have conversations with grantee programs to discuss the critical question of how their programs support measurable growth in children, not simply how many children does their program serve.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Berkshire United Way integrated quality elements into its funding requests to help ensure accountability for program impact and evaluation.</li> <li>• Springfield's \$1 million funding collaborative is redirecting investments into programs with measureable impact.</li> </ul>
<p><b>School district leaders must be at the table.</b> High functioning school-community partnerships are essential to driving the work. To be successful, community organizations, philanthropies, the local library, school systems and community leaders need to be actively engaged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The engagement of school superintendents proved pivotal. Transitions stalled some community literacy campaigns while fresh leadership ignited others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holyoke's new Superintendent established comprehensive and action-driven working committees; he also brought the B-8 coordinating role from the mayor's office into the school district, both catalyzing a powerful movement forward.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The quality of K-3 instruction matters.</b> Public school team members emphasized that what happens in Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is critical to success.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In partnership with principals and district administration, campaigns must lead a discussion regarding the quality of K-3 instruction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Under Holyoke's new Theory of Action plan, a specific district workgroup was established to overhaul, align, and improve literacy instruction PreK-3.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sustainability requires investment in a long-term owner.</b> Community teams recognized this work takes time and persistent effort.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communities should identify a leader who can convene stakeholders, serve as a mediator between higher-level planners and direct service programs, and build and monitor collaborative action plans.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pittsfield and Holyoke each created positions to coordinate ongoing B-8 campaign activities.</li> <li>• Three communities received state funding for building B-8 capacity and infrastructure.</li> </ul>
<p><b>All stakeholders must acknowledge responsibility and become accountable.</b> Communities had the greatest success when recognizing individuals' roles and responsibilities. They, too, had a clear leader who could garner investment from multiple community sectors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Boston team's backbone agency, the Boston Opportunity Agenda, convened leaders from the expansive landscape of literacy programs and the Boston Public Schools to ensure program alignment and the coordination of services.</li> </ul>