Buffalo Literacy Campaign
Focus Groups with Target Populations

Buffalo Reads

PREPARED BY

Center for Governmental Research Inc.

FOR

Good Schools for All

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GoodSchools
for All
A Community Partnership
for Student Achievement

BUFFALO LITERACY CAMPAIGN
Focus Groups with Target Populations

Prepared for:
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Project Director

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FOCUS GROUPS WITH TARGET POPULATIONS

SUMMARY

Good Schools For All ("Good Schools") is a strategic partnership of stakeholders—foundations, businesses, educators, parents, and the community-at-large—committed to developing innovative ideas and practices to improve student achievement in Buffalo's public schools. These stakeholders recognize that urban public education is the responsibility of an entire community.

Buffalo Reads is a literacy coalition, first convened by Good Schools in 2003. Currently it includes more than 40 local organizations and agencies, all committed to improving literacy in Buffalo. Working cooperatively, Buffalo Reads and Good Schools are spearheading an initiative to change the paradigm for literacy in Buffalo. They are laying the groundwork for a far-reaching citywide literacy campaign that has as its goal 100% literacy for all of Buffalo's 292,648 citizens, including approximately 45,000 school children.

Rather than restructure literature services without the input of those being served, Good Schools and Buffalo Reads want to hear directly from children, youth, parents, and adults regarding their thoughts and perceptions on literacy issues. Good Schools engaged CGR to conduct twelve focus groups for the purpose of better understanding the needs of these populations. The information obtained from the focus groups will compliment results of a quantitative needs analysis also underway, and will help paint a fuller picture of needed literacy services and supports in the City of Buffalo. Observations, themes and recommendations have been summarized in the following report representing data collected by CGR over the course of 12 focus groups.

Four target populations were included in the focus groups: (1) school-age children and youth, (2) parents, (3) adult English language learners, and (4) service providers. Good Schools for All staff worked with Literacy Volunteers, the school district, the community centers, and other contacts to arrange three focus groups within each of the four target populations.

Findings and Recommendations

CGR grouped and analyzed participant statements within various themes, as summarized here for the four target populations. For each population we provide a brief statement of findings, and then list the recommendations. More detail, including specific quotes from participants, can be found in the body of the report.

<table>
<tr><td>**SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN/ YOUTH**</td></tr>
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A. Perceptions About Reading

Clearly, the importance of reading and its benefits were fully understood amongst our children and youth participants. Although the children/youth appear to see an obvious correlation between reading and increased opportunities (i.e. education, occupations), we still observed a lack of individual commitment to reading, particularly among the two older groups. For those in grades 7-12, other activities (e.g. sports, being with friends) are often described as more enjoyable than reading.

A1. Recommendation: Educate children and youth regarding the relationship between a personal commitment to reading and increased educational and occupational opportunities.

A2. Recommendation: Distribute information on various occupations and demonstrate why literacy is critical to achieving desired careers.

B. Current Reading Habits

Children in grades 1-6 were excited about reading and appear to experience only minimal pressure from peers in terms of teasing or pressure to engage in other activities. Those in grades 7-12 said that peer perceptions did not negatively impact reading habits, but less than half these participants enjoyed reading as a leisure activity. Among the Juvenile Delinquent group, most said they read a lot because they don't have many other options to pass the

time. Many youth face serious challenges at home, and in some cases their first priority is food, clothing and shelter, rather than schoolwork.

B1. Recommendation: Improve access to neighborhood libraries or create libraries in other locations, such as community centers.

B2. Recommendation: Encourage school teachers to utilize the school libraries with their students.

B3. Recommendation: Create a family-centered reading program in order for the appropriate modeling to occur.

B4. Recommendation: Select and purchase book series for neighborhood and school libraries whenever possible.

B5. Recommendation: Purchase new books for the library in the Juvenile Detention Center.

B6. Recommendation: Encourage students to persevere through difficult words, and perhaps distribute pocket dictionaries to all students.

B7. Recommendation: Review in-school public assistance (i.e. food, clothing, shelter referrals) for families with absent parents/caregivers.

B8. Recommendation: Create a job assistance program in the Buffalo high schools. Perhaps this could be an additional service provided through the guidance office. Pursue creation of a youth employment one-stop center through the Workforce Investment Board.

C. Designing a New Literacy Program

Children and youth overwhelmingly described a need for incentives and motivational factors to keep them interested in reading. Respondents thought that competition could improve interest and participation in reading.

C1. Recommendation: Develop reading challenges, contests, competitions.

C2. Recommendation: Provide incentives (i.e. food, movie passes, field trips, games) to encourage reading and writing.

C3. Recommendation: Since some children and youth indicate an interest in writing (in journals, writing stories, etc.), and since reading and writing are

complementary skills, writing could be used as a tool to increase interest in reading, and to develop literacy skills.

C4. Recommendation: Create a story time reading program and solicit student volunteers to read aloud to younger readers.

C5. Recommendation: Be sure to involve as many adults as possible in children's lives, and in any reading or writing programs that are under development. Perhaps involve local celebrities (i.e. professional athletes, entertainers) to help encourage children and youth to participate in new programs.

PARENTS

A. Home Environment

When asked what they do to help prepare their children for school on a daily basis, various parent participants mentioned that they provide a good breakfast, they lay out clothes the night before, provide encouragement to and have patience with their children, and read scripture to their children before they leave for school. To encourage their children's development in reading and writing, the parents help with their homework, take them to the library or to bookstores, give verbal encouragement, and set schoolwork and reading as a priority in the home.

A1. Recommendation: Family literacy programs should include discussion about what parents can do both to prepare children to learn in school, and also specifically to improve their reading.

B. Challenges, Barriers, Distractions from Reading

When asked about barriers to reading, and about distractions that keep children from reading, the list was long. Some mentioned electronics such as television, video games, computers, and cell phones.

Others mentioned time limitations, with all the activities children are involved with after school and in other free time. Also, single parents face significant challenges in terms of finding time to spend with their children on reading. Some mentioned personal issues or personality characteristics among their children, such as being embarrassed they are reading below grade level, limited attention spans, personality conflicts (with parents), puberty,

needing extra help or not requesting needed help, behavioral problems, and learning disabilities.

B1. Recommendation: Family literacy programs should encourage parents to turn off the television, limit video game time, and encourage family reading time.

B2. Recommendation: Encourage schools to work with parents to help them understand their children's assignments. Encourage schools to teach parents techniques to engage their children's interest in schoolwork.

C. Motivation and Encouragement for Reading

Several parents responded that it's important for children to see their parents reading. Some said that incentives such as passes to Darien Lake, or Pizza Hut, or a chore chart that includes rewards for reading among other "chores."

C1. Recommendation: Individuals and organizations involved in improving literacy among children and youth should consider adding incentives and prizes to help encourage children to read.

C2. Recommendation: Develop family-oriented "reading night" with pizza, games, and other activities.

D. Role of Community Organizations

When asked what community organizations can do to support parents and children in literacy endeavors, parents stated that the book mobile, which used to travel around and provide reading materials to children, should be reinstated. They suggested that books be donated to Boys and Girls clubs or community centers to provide more structured reading time. A need for more parental involvement was mentioned, as well as a need for more support for parents.

D1. Recommendation: Seriously consider providing evening and weekend hours in community organizations to accommodate working parents and single parents.

E. Role of Schools

Some parents stated that schools need to provide better communication regarding children's rate of progress. Parents want to hear when their children are doing well, not just when there are behavior issues. Parents are frustrated when schools send standardized test scores home with no code book to help interpret the scores. Parents want to know what is in the curriculum for their children each year or marking period. They would also like to see more time for reading in the school day.

E1. Recommendation: Individual teachers, as well as schools and the school district could review the protocol for interacting with parents at different grade levels. Opportunities to improve parent-teacher or parent-school interaction exist.

E2. Recommendation: Individual teachers as well as a schools could review class time and try to add time for uninterrupted reading.

ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

A. Current Reading Habits

Reading content naturally varies from one individual to another based upon areas of interest. When asked what is read for fun, responses included books about exercise and geography, dictionaries, National Geographic magazine, the Bible and newspapers. One important source of reading materials is the public library system. However, 15 Buffalo neighborhood libraries have closed since August 2005. Examples of cultural or geographical differences that prove difficult to this population include dealing with the Buffalo weather, learning about new foods, and learning about cultural differences in child discipline.

A1. Recommendation: Short of reopening the neighborhood libraries, find alternative locations where individuals may borrow donated books.

A2. Recommendation: Help individuals create a plan that incorporates not only improving literacy but cultural assimilation.

B. Goals and Objectives

Goals regarding literacy varied greatly from one individual to the next. Some included filling out a job application, finding coupons to save money, passing the test for a driver's license, shopping at

Tops or Wegmans, improving reading comprehension, using maps or a bus schedule, and reading to kids.

While the adults found it easy to describe their goals, it was not apparent that each individual had a plan centered on achieving that specific goal.

B1. Recommendation: Define a specific work plan centered on a specific goal or goals for each participant.

C. Recommendations for New Literacy Programs

Participants were asked what services they were currently using to improve their reading skills, and whether there are existing organizations they felt could offer reading and writing services in addition to their current selection. Recommended changes to current services and programs included creating smaller groups in which adults can practice reading and speaking. In addition, smaller groups would also help individuals to build a stronger network of support and foster a healthy level of accountability for improvement.

Participants stated they would like to see distribution of incentives and recognition for achievements. Many adult learners are ashamed and embarrassed about their low literacy skills, and the addition of incentives and recognition could add a sense of pride.

C1. Recommendation: Create incentive programs for all adult learning programs and services.

C2. Recommendation: Enable small group study and opportunities to practice conversational English.

C3. Recommendation: Create a comprehensive workforce development program.

SERVICE PROVIDERS

Service providers were asked to describe external factors that affect literacy, internal factors in their organizations that affect provision of literacy services, their thoughts on collaboration, and recommendations for change.

A. External Factors Affecting Literacy

Participants were asked for opinions on external factors that affect literacy and a number of themes emerged. Participants described limited access to books for youth and adults due to library closures, and due to lack of household and family resources.

A1. Recommendation: Provide services through community based organizations and schools to enable families to meet immediate needs (i.e. food, clothing, shelter) so that literacy can remain a priority at all times.

A2. Recommendation: Short of reopening all closed libraries, create substitutes such as reading rooms with donated books and other reading materials.

A3. Recommendation: Recruit librarians that have experience building reading programs to further support the literacy initiatives of the Buffalo Reads collaborative.

A4. Recommendation: Stock school libraries with developmentally appropriate books for children.

A5. Recommendation: Staff school libraries with professionals whose specialties include promoting literacy.

A6. Recommendation: Ensure every child has at least one leisure book at all times.

A7. Recommendation: Multiple class sets of books are needed for work in the classroom and reinforcement outside of the classroom.

Participants discussed the challenges of frequently changing standards and curriculum packages in the schools. They described a lack of training, and a lack of mandates for teams to complete training.

A8. Recommendation: Align curriculums and standards across all of the Buffalo Public Schools.

A9. Recommendation: Train all teachers on the new curriculum and standards.

Providers perceive that many parents are not supportive of literacy efforts, due to a lack of knowledge.

A10. Recommendation: Support family literacy programs that encourage literacy beginning at birth.

A11. Recommendation: Increase parental modeling—reading and valuing literacy activities.

A12. Recommendation: Create parallel programs to encourage child and adult literacy.

A13. Recommendation: Create and implement parenting skills programs.

A14: Recommendation: Provide parental instruction so that they can provide homework assistance to their children.

Providers described a "Deprioritization of Learning." Many of the participating providers believe the current state of literacy in Buffalo is the result of a culture that does not make learning a priority.

A15. Recommendation: Make learning and literacy a priority by creating a holistic campaign that involves the home environment, school system and the community at large.

A16. Recommendation: Target and provide the services needed for adults currently without a high school diploma or GED equivalent.

A17. Recommendation: Develop after-school programs geared towards improving literacy for children and families.

Some providers described children and adults with undiagnosed learning disabilities, which can present a serious barrier to learning and literacy.

A18. Recommendation: Increase awareness within the medical community, social services agencies, and communities to promptly identify learning disabilities in children and adults, and recommend interventions or follow-up.

Lack of funding, or inappropriate allocation of funding was discussed, as well as the need for improved accountability.

A19. Recommendation: Analyze current literacy funding levels to determine whether waste exists and then reallocate current funding to areas of greatest need.

A20. Recommendation: Identify potential sources of in-kind, non-financial support within the community. Perhaps churches could be used as neighborhood "reading rooms" to provide another constructive outlet for children and adults.

B. Internal Factors—Strengths and Weaknesses of Literacy Provider Organizations

The second question asked participants about any issues or factors internal to their organization that affect literacy, positively or negatively, in the community. Strengths mentioned by participants included:

- ❖ Existing partnerships & collaboratives.

- ❖ Strong communication within their organization/agency.

- ❖ Commitment of teachers and staff to their work and to individuals they serve.

- ❖ Using a research-based program with specific, measurable outcomes.

Several challenges or weaknesses within these organizations were also noted:

- ❖ Lack of sufficient staff which often leads to high rates of staff burnout and turnover.

- ❖ *"Reading teachers are currently stretched too thin"* because they are often training and conducting assessments and left without sufficient time to do their work.

- ❖ *"There are so many other needs before literacy (i.e. employment, resettlement) so literacy programs are put on the backburner."*

- ❖ The *"Growing English as a Second Language ("ESL") Population"* continues to increase rapidly without the proper services and supports needed to make an impact.

- ❖ *"Lack of Funds (i.e. new materials, special projects, field trips)"* and *"Lack of Ongoing Funding Streams."*

C. Collaboration

Participants pointed out that in many cases funders today require collaborative efforts. Collaboration can prevent people and organizations from re-inventing the wheel, can ensure that best practices are used more comprehensively, and therefore help to create consistency for the recipients of literacy services.

However, participants also cautioned that agencies must share the same goal to have a successful collaboration.

C1. Recommendation: Encourage collaboration among agencies, especially for funding purposes and to facilitate the use of best practices.

D. Suggestions for Change

Participants stated desires for increases in funding or other resources, a desire for increased services or availability of services, and a number of suggestions for shifts in thinking or behavior.

D1. Recommendation: Engage experts in the literacy community to generate new ideas for change.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the individuals who agreed to give up their personal time to speak with us about their thoughts on literacy issues.

We would also like to thank Literacy Volunteers, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo, and Erie County Probation for providing us with access to children, youth, and adults for this data gathering effort.

Finally, the staff of Good Schools for All are thanked for their help in scheduling and coordinating the focus group sessions.

Staff Team

Tabitha Castro-Hairston helped to facilitate and record the focus groups, and contributed substantially to this final report. Her instincts and thoughtful perceptions regarding literacy issues were instrumental in both the conduct of the focus groups and interpretation of the data.

Jennifer Syverud provided assistance in the entry of focus group data, and in recording selected focus group data.

INTRODUCTION

Good Schools For All ("Good Schools") is a strategic partnership of stakeholders—foundations, businesses, educators, parents, and the community-at-large—committed to developing innovative ideas and practices to improve student achievement in Buffalo's public schools. These stakeholders recognize that urban public education is the responsibility of an entire community.

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FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

The four target populations for the focus groups included school-age children and youth, parents, adult English language learners, and literacy-service providers. Each of the focus groups was held in locations familiar to the participants and lasted approximately

an hour and 30 minutes. The twelve focus groups provided the desired mix of participants, as described below.

School-age Children/Youth: The first youth focus group was held at a local clubhouse of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo, and included a mix of nine males and females in grades 7 through 12. The second focus group was with thirteen males ages 14 to 17 in a Buffalo Boys & Girls Club at the Juvenile Detention Center. The final focus group was held at a Northwest Community Center and included eleven younger boys and girls in grades 1 through 6.

Parents: The first Parents focus group was held at a local Boys & Girls Club and included seven mothers of Middle Schoolers. The second Parents group was held at Literacy Volunteers and included four mothers of very young children (ages 0-4). The third Parents group was with parents of Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo members at the Valley Community Center and included eight mothers of children and youth ages 5 to 14.

Adult English language learners: The adult groups included higher functioning immigrants (5 participants) and adults who grew up speaking English (5 participants), both held at the Literacy Volunteers of America headquarters in Buffalo. A group of newer, lower functioning immigrants participated at Catholic Charities, and included approximately 30 adults.

Service providers: The three Service Providers focus groups included classroom teachers, librarians, staff at literacy agencies, ESL teachers, reading and special education teachers, and guidance counselors and all three groups were held at the GFSA headquarters in Buffalo. Approximately 25 total individuals participated in these three focus groups.

Focus Groups

Major Group	Description	Location	Date
Other Adults	Basic English Language Learners (ELL)	Catholic Charities	1/23/2006
Other Adults	Growing up learning English	Literacy Volunteers	1/26/2006
Other Adults	Higher functioning ELL	Literacy Volunteers	1/26/2006
Parents	Parents of infant to pre-schoolers	Literacy Volunteers	1/21/2006
Parents	Parents of middle schoolers	Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo	1/12/2006
Parents	Parents of children ages 5 to 14	Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo-Masten Clubhouse	2/2/2006
Providers	CBOs, teachers, librarians	Good Schools for All	1/23/2006
Providers	CBOs, teachers, librarians	Good Schools for All	2/2/2006
Providers	CBOs, teachers, librarians	Good Schools for All	1/9/2006
Youth	1st-6th graders	Community Center	1/12/2006
Youth	7th-12th graders	Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo	1/10/2006
Youth	14 to 17 year old boys	Boys & Girls Clubs of Buffalo-Juvenile Detention Center	1/12/2006

Incentives/ Compensation

In CGR's experience conducting focus groups, it is important to offer participants compensation to show appreciation for their time and effort. We provided pizza and soda for the young children and the youth in juvenile detention. We paid the older youth $10 for participation in addition to providing pizza. For parents and adult learners we provided $35 in compensation, and provided pizza when it was appropriate. Participants in the service provider groups were not compensated.

Location

Many organizations targeted for focus groups had existing meeting schedules in place which we were able to utilize. Where possible, we took advantage of their current meeting places and times rather than attempt to schedule and coordinate a separate meeting place.

Focus Group Protocol

CGR designed a focus group protocol which outlined the methodology to be used (ice-breaker, length of time, format), as well as the specific questions to be asked. In CGR's experience, it is best to begin with general questions that offer participants the opportunity to brainstorm and share their initial thoughts, and then follow the general discussion with more targeted questions and probes if needed.

A set of draft questions was developed with the Good Schools for All staff. As the initial focus groups were completed, minor revisions and additions were made to ensure the questions elicited the desired feedback. For a final list of focus group questions, see the Appendix.

Focus Group Facilitation

Two moderators facilitated the focus groups, with one taking written notes and the other facilitating group dynamics and discussion. While some organizations rely on audiotape for recording focus group information, we have found that participants are often uncomfortable with this approach and therefore decided not to use a tape recorder.

Each focus group began with an introduction of the moderators, followed by a brief but clear description of the reason for the focus group, what we hoped to accomplish, and what the "ground rules" of the session would be. Ground rules included items such as (1) there are no right or wrong answers; (2) you don't all have to agree with one another; (3) talk one at a time; and (4) comments are confidential in that no one's name will be included in the reported findings. This introduction was followed by a simple ice-breaker, such as everyone stating their name and sharing the name of their favorite book (for youth), their children's names and ages (for parents, and American-born adult learners), their country of origin (for foreign-born adult learners), or their professional position (for service providers).

After the introduction and ice-breaker, we started with general questions to provide the participants with time to begin thinking about the issues of literacy, reading, and writing. As described in the previous section, it is important to allow participants leeway in their thinking, and not to lead them into any statements or conclusions. However, the questions become more specific as the session moves forward, especially if important issues did not arise on their own.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

CGR entered all focus group comments into MS Access, and coded each comment according to the focus group it came from

and its theme. Using MS Access allowed CGR to sort the comments based on theme, which allowed for more in-depth analysis, presented below.

In this section we provide an overview of focus group input, grouped by theme. In some cases we provide quotes from the participants; these are highlighted in italics and include the source focus group in parentheses. Many quotes are paraphrased for ease of reading, and because the focus groups were not taped.

School-Age Children/Youth

The three children and youth focus groups included a group of younger children in grades 1 through 6, a group of youth in grades 7 through 12, and a group of 14 to 17 year old juvenile delinquents. We discuss the results of the three groups together. Several themes emerged from the groups.

A. Perceptions about Reading

Ascertaining current perceptions about books, reading, and writing was an important part of our discussion with the children and youth participants. We asked whether they enjoyed reading, what they liked to read, if they felt reading was important and if there were times they found it difficult. Other questions attempted to reveal why reading may not be considered a fun activity and whether they had any opinions about how reading affected their futures.

Clearly, the importance of reading and its benefits was fully understood amongst our children and youth participants. The following comments regarding the importance of reading were shared.

Reading …

…is important so you can pass to the next grade. (Grades 1 – 6, Grades 7-12)

…is necessary to get your drivers license. (Grades 7-12)

…is necessary for all occupations. (Grades 7-12)

…will help you get a good paying job. (Juvenile Delinquents)

…will help you go to college. (Grades 1-6)

…is important so you can read to your child. (Grades 1-6)

… expands your mind. (Juvenile Delinquents)

…is important despite age. (Juvenile Delinquents)

…helps you get a good education. (Juvenile Delinquents)

Although the children and youth see an obvious correlation between reading and increased opportunities (i.e. education, occupations), we still observed a lack of individual/personal commitment to reading, particularly among the two older groups. For those in grades 7-12, other activities (e.g. sports, being with friends) are often more enjoyable than reading. One 10th grade participant stated that he had not read an entire book since grade 5. Another participant currently in the 9th grade stated that he had never read a single book. However, when asked what kinds of jobs they were interested in their responses included electrician, chiropractor, dental assistant, plumber, and police officer, clearly all occupations that will require excellent literacy skills.

A1. Recommendation: Educate children and youth regarding the relationship between a personal commitment to reading and increased educational and occupational opportunities.

A2. Recommendation: Distribute information on various occupations and demonstrate why literacy is critical to achieving their desired careers.

B. Current Reading Habits

The discussion questions in this section were centered around what types of books were being read, what other types of reading material (e.g. magazines, internet, newspapers) were popular, and what difficulties the participants may be experiencing with reading. In addition, it was important to determine if peer pressure negatively affected reading habits.

Children in grades 1-6 were excited about reading and appeared to experience only minimal pressure from peers in terms of teasing or pressure to engage in other activities. Those in grades 7-12 said that peer perceptions did not negatively impact reading habits, but less than half these participants enjoyed reading as a leisure activity. Among the Juvenile Delinquent group, most said they

read a lot because they don't have many other options to pass the time.

Many of the children and youth who stated they don't enjoy reading also said they do not have access to books in the home. In some cases, their only sources for books are the neighborhood and school libraries. However, 15 neighborhood libraries have closed since August 2005 in addition to recent layoffs among school librarians.

B1. Recommendation: Improve access to neighborhood libraries or create libraries in other locations, such as community centers.

B2. Recommendation: Encourage school teachers to utilize the school libraries with their students.

Children and youth who enjoy reading often said they see their parents or grandparents reading at home.

B3. Recommendation: Create a family-centered reading program in order for the appropriate modeling to occur.

Many participants across all age groups were interested in reading an entire book series (e.g. *Harry Potter, The Chronicles of Narnia, Forage by Fire*).

B4. Recommendation: Select and purchase book series for neighborhood and school libraries whenever possible.

Although the Juvenile Detention Center has a fully functioning library on premises, youth indicated the book selection is limited and many of the books are in poor condition. In addition, the subject matter of many of the books was of little or no interest to the potential readers.

B5. Recommendation: Purchase new books for the library in the Juvenile Detention Center.

Limited vocabulary and substandard comprehension skills are an obvious reading deterrent. More specifically, many participants admitted reading is a turn-off because many of the words are unknown which results in limited comprehension. Over time this

resulted in decreased enjoyment from reading and interests in other preferred activities.

B6. Recommendation: Encourage students to persevere through difficult words, and perhaps distribute pocket dictionaries to all students.

Several social issues surfaced during our discussion at the detention center. For the Juvenile Delinquents, occupations of interest included teaching, writing, coaching and law. However, they stated that finding appropriate food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and sometimes for younger siblings were considerable distractions. As a result many participants stated that they "hustle" (engage in illegal activity) in order to provide for their younger siblings or themselves. Hustling is perceived by these youth as an industry and a viable, immediate option to meet both personal and financial needs of the family. Participants also shared that their parents were often unavailable and perhaps absent (i.e. incarcerated, addicted to drugs) and were unable to provide for their families.

B7. Recommendation: Review in-school public assistance (food, clothing, shelter referrals) for families with absent parents/caregivers.

When asked if other employment opportunities existed besides hustling, most stated they knew of only low-paying jobs (e.g. McDonalds) in their communities. They stated they would not seek out other options unless they had a "hook-up" meaning a friend or relative that provided assistance by communicating available jobs and/or providing a character reference.

B8. Recommendation: Create a job assistance program in the Buffalo high schools. Perhaps this could be an additional service provided through the guidance office. Pursue creation of a youth employment one-stop center through the Workforce Investment Board.

C. Recommendations for New Literacy Programs

One important purpose for conducting the focus groups was to determine what changes could be made to the current literacy programs to encourage reading in the Buffalo community. When asked to design a new reading program the participants in all three

groups were extremely responsive. Children and youth overwhelmingly described a need for incentives and motivational factors to keep them interested. Respondents thought that competition could improve interest and participation in reading.

C1. Recommendation: Develop reading challenges, contests, and competitions.

C2. Recommendation: Provide incentives (e.g. food, movie passes, field trips, games) to encourage reading and writing.

An obvious theme among all youth participants was the need for reading material to be interesting and relatable. The following comments summarize how this theme was expressed.

Enjoying books that catch your attention in the first two sentences. (Grades 7-12)

You want to read when the back of the book grabs your attention. (Juvenile Delinquents)

Reading is fun when…

…there are lots of details. (Grades 1-6)

…it makes you laugh. (Grades 1-6)

...you know the big words. (Grades 1-6)

…you picture what you read in your head. (Grades 1-6)

Another common theme among participants was the relationship between reading and writing. Most participants seemed to enjoy writing, either in journals, or writing stories, or other ways.

C3. Recommendation: Since some children and youth indicate an interest in writing (in journals, writing stories, etc.), and since reading and writing are complementary skills, writing could be used as a tool to increase interest in reading, and to develop literacy skills.

Participants expressed an interest in writing about what they've read. Things they enjoyed writing about included…

…animals (Grades 1-6)

…poetry (Grades 7-12)

…about their life (Grades 7-12)

Another trend seemed to be setting aside class time to practice reading aloud. Students also expressed an interest in reading to other students on a lower reading level.

C4. Recommendation: Create a story time reading program and solicit student volunteers to read aloud to younger readers.

When asked how they would teach a classroom full of peers, participants had some ideas, but participants in all three groups primarily expressed that they believe individuals must be self-motivated. They stated that the responsibility to improve reading skills was up to the individual, first and foremost.

…you can't teach peers, it's up to them to be motivated. (Juvenile Delinquents)

…you can't help those that don't want to be helped because they must want to learn. (Juvenile Delinquents)

Many of the juvenile delinquents reported having had mentors, however all reported a lack of a personal connection. Most shared that mentors just picked them up and took them places without ever spending time developing a meaningful relationship. As mentioned previously, modeling is an effective way in which youth can be encouraged to read. Perhaps individual mentoring relationships would not prove to be beneficial; however, involving other members of the community in this effort may prove useful.

C5. Recommendation: Be sure to involve as many adults as possible in children's lives, and in any reading or writing programs that are under development. Perhaps involve local celebrities (i.e. professional athletes, entertainers) to help encourage children and youth to participate in new programs.

Parents

The three parent groups consisted of all females, primarily mothers with a small number of grandmothers. Parents had children ranging from infants through age 18 and older.

A. Home Environment

When asked what they do to help prepare their children for school on a daily basis, various parent participants mentioned that they provide a good breakfast, they lay out clothes the night before, they provide patience and encouragement to their children, and read scripture to the children before they leave for school.

When asked what they do specifically to encourage their children's development in reading and writing, the parents listed a number of activities such as helping them with their homework, taking them to the library or to Barnes and Noble bookstores, giving them verbal encouragement, and setting schoolwork and reading as a priority in the home. Many parents indicated that they have computers in their home. One parent described reading and literacy as a lifestyle, including going to the library on a regular basis.

"I can provide assistance with homework except for math." (Middle School)

"I try to encourage more reading with my children." (Middle School)

"If reading is introduced at an early age, they won't view it negatively." (Pre-School Children)

We asked the participants what they think their children like to read. Parents of pre-schoolers named Dr. Suess books and other rhyming books. Parents of older children mentioned Highlights Magazine, Kids Digest, magazines, and books. When asked what the read in the summer, parents typically responded that the children really do not read in the summer—it's seen as time off. Parents were in strong agreement that reading is important, and they recognized the importance of modeling reading behaviors for their children, that reading and imagination are important for thinking, and that they'll need good literacy skills to be successful in the workplace. Parents in the Middle School group offered that they are the most responsible parties to ensure their children develop good reading skills.

"If you can't read, you can't learn." (5 to 14 year olds)

"Reading is fundamental to school success." (5 to 14 year olds)

"Reading has to be considered a 'basic' that children must learn, like manners." (Pre-School children)

A1. Recommendation: Family literacy programs should include discussion about what parents can do both to prepare children to learn in school, and also specifically to improve their reading.

B. Challenges, Barriers, Distractions from Reading

When asked what the barriers to reading are, and what types of distractions keep children from reading, the list was long. Some mentioned electronics such as television, video games, computers, and cell phones.

"With new technologies available, kids are not looking to books as much." (Pre-School children)

B1. Recommendation: Family literacy programs should encourage parents to turn off the television, limit video game time, and encourage family reading time.

Others mentioned time limitations, with all the activities children are involved with after school and in other free time. Also, single parents face significant challenges in terms of finding time to spend with their children on reading. Some mentioned personal issues or personality characteristics among their children, such as being embarrassed they are reading below grade level, limited attention spans, personality conflicts (with parents), puberty, needing extra help or not requesting needed help, behavioral problems, and learning disabilities.

"My son is currently reading on a lower reading level, and is embarrassed in front of his friends." (Middle School)

"Extracurricular activities compete with time for reading." (5 to 14 year olds)

Some parents said their children lost interest in reading around 4th or 5th grade, or that they became complacent in junior high. Some mentioned the challenge of teachers that are disliked, or teaching styles that do not work for some children. Some said that teacher feedback is limited. Several parents said that the curriculum content changes drastically from year to year, especially in math.

This makes it difficult for the parents to keep up, or to help their children with homework.

Parents stated that some children feel that reading is punishment, that the children do not apply themselves, that they read too fast to comprehend, or that they find a book interesting but the assignment (book reports) unenjoyable. Others said that the heavy workload including homework is a lot for the children, and they become discouraged.

"My child reads too fast and misses words." (Middle School)

"[Curriculum] content changes drastically year to year, especially math." (Middle School)

"Each school, each teacher, and each child is different." (5 to 14 year olds)

"Maybe there is too much pressure on children." (5 to 14 year olds)

B2. Recommendation: Encourage schools to work with parents to help them understand their children's assignments. Encourage schools to teach parents techniques to engage their children's interest in schoolwork.

C. Motivation, Encouragement for Reading

Parents were asked what would motivate their children to do more reading. Several parents responded that it's important for the children to see their parents reading. Some said that incentives such as passes to Darien Lake, or Pizza Hut, or a chore chart that includes rewards for reading among other "chores."

"We set a family quiet time for reading." (Middle School)

"One time I picked up a book, and within minutes I looked at my kids and they had each picked up a book" (5 to 14 year olds)

"We need to be positive and enthusiastic about reading."(Pre-School Children)

One parent said that Oprah's book club encourages her kids to read, and others said it's important to let children pick out their own books.

Some parents described encouraging their children to take a break when they are frustrated and trying again later. They described

asking the children questions about the books they've read to see if they comprehend what they read. Parents of younger children talk about encouraging them to learn "sight words." They describe making it fun, like learning to recognize "Burger King" and other words on signs as they drive. Parent participants stated that this allows them to teach reading in a non-stressful way, since so many kids are feeling overwhelmed by stress and peer pressure.

C1. Recommendation: Individuals and organizations involved in improving literacy among children and youth should consider adding incentives and prizes to help encourage children to read.

C2. Recommendation: Develop family-oriented "reading night" with pizza, games, and other activities.

D. Role of Community Organizations

When asked what community organizations can do to support parents and children in literacy endeavors, parents responded that they should reinstate the book mobile, which used to travel around and provide reading materials to children. They suggested that books be donated to Boys and Girls clubs or community centers to provide more structured reading time. A need for more parental involvement was mentioned, as well as a need for more support for parents. These parents also suggested that their children need more help learning how to do research on the internet, and in how to use the local library.

Some parents encouraged faith-based programs as a source of support. They described a need for evening and weekend hours for any parent resources that are developed.

D1. Recommendation: Seriously consider providing evening and weekend hours in community organizations to accommodate working parents and single parents.

E. Role of the Schools

Some parents said that teachers are not supportive of their needs. For example, they stated that schools need to provide better communication regarding children's rate of progress. Parents want to hear when their children are doing well, not just when there are behavior issues. Parents are frustrated when schools send standardized test scores home with no code book to help interpret the scores. Parents want to know what is in the

curriculum for their children each year or marking period. Parents want referrals to websites that will help them find resources.

E1. Recommendation: Individual teachers, as well as schools and the school district could review the protocol for interacting with parents at different grade levels. Opportunities to improve parent-teacher or parent-school interaction exist.

Parents feel the schools could make some changes to encourage more reading among children. For example, schools could provide time just for reading in the high schools through "SSR" or "sustained silent reading," like they do in the elementary schools.

E2. Recommendation: Individual teachers as well as schools could review class time and try to add time for uninterrupted reading.

Parents feel that summer reading lists are helpful, and the Buffalo Reads newsletter provided good sources of information for extra help. Some parents felt that incentives in the schools, such as pizza parties and other rewards would encourage students to do more reading.

The reading philosophies are different among different schools, parents in one group stated they cannot rely on the schools. Others stated that with so many different learning styles among students, how can the schools possibly teach appropriately to all children? There is a need for more collaboration between teachers and parents and the community.

One parent whose child is about to enter school has several concerns. She has heard that students cannot bring books home anymore, so she wonders how she can help the child with homework. Parents don't want their children learning what will be on the test; they want them to truly learn and comprehend.

Adult English Language Learners

The three adult English language learner groups included one group of U.S. born adults, most of whom did not graduate from high school, and all of whom have difficulty with reading. The other two groups were composed of adults born abroad. One group included a number of newly arrived immigrants, who were

learning very basic English. The second group of immigrants was more advanced in their English skills.

A. Current Reading Habits

Our initial discussion began with determining what items, in any language, were read for fun by each of the participants. As a follow-up question we asked what they read in English for fun. We also tried to ascertain if reading was fun and what the participants enjoyed reading about. Important to this discussion was when reading English became particularly difficult and what barriers prevented or discouraged them from learning or improving their English. Last, we asked about life experiences that affected their ability to read and write.

Leisure Reading

Reading content, as seen with the other focus group categories, varies from one individual to another based upon areas of interest. When asked what is read for fun, responses included books about exercise and geography in addition to dictionaries, National Geographic magazine, the Bible and newspapers.

One important source of reading materials is the public library system. However, many neighborhood libraries have closed, including the one in the part of the city which has the largest immigrant community.

A1. Recommendation: Short of reopening the neighborhood libraries, find alternative locations where individuals may borrow donated books.

Difficulties in learning English

An area of concern for all immigrants is that they and/or their children will forget their native language. Another related difficulty for immigrants is their children often become better readers and speakers of English than their parents. As a result parents soon become less effective with homework assistance.

When asked what types of situations they encounter that prove difficult in a new county, immigrants named the weather, different foods, and cultural differences in disciplining children as examples of issues that can be distractions to the learner.

A2. Recommendation: Help individuals create a plan that incorporates not only improving literacy but cultural assimilation.

Life Experiences

For immigrants, coming to a new country is a catalyst for learning English. But for adults that grew up speaking English, the issue may have its roots in the culture of their childhood home. Many U.S.-born adult English learners experienced traumatic events during their childhood and as a result many were not given the support they needed to excel in school. They shared the following sentiments during our discussion:

…education was not valued/important in the home (U.S. born)

…education was pushed but parents did not encourage (U.S. born)

…blames the family for not responding to status of report cards (U.S. born)

…negative influences of family (U.S. born)

B. Goals & Objectives

We asked participants about their goals and objectives, and what encouraged them to seek out literacy services. While the goals varied greatly from one individual to the next all participants had specific goals they wanted to reach. Most goals were associated with broadening the scope of employment opportunities.

Some responses to this area of discussion included:

…to fill out a job application (ESL - Higher functioning)

…to find coupons to save money (ESL - Higher functioning)

…to pass the test for a driver's license (ESL - Higher functioning)

…to shop at Tops or Wegmans (ESL - Higher functioning)

…to improve reading comprehension (U.S. born)

…to use and understand maps and/or bus schedule (ESL - Higher functioning)

…to read to kids (All)

While the adults found it easy to share their goals, it was not apparent that each individual had a plan centered on achieving that specific goal. Although it may seem challenging to the agencies

that offer the programs and services, perhaps tailoring a plan for each individual based on their needs and desires would encourage prolonged participation. While motivation seems less of a factor for those individuals learning English as a second language perhaps this approach would help participants achieve goals more quickly.

Since smaller study groups were desired for most of the higher functioning adults perhaps goals could be cross-referenced and those individuals with similar goals could be grouped for study. For immigrants, these groups could facilitate building a network of support. As an example, for those seeking help with employment-oriented goals (e.g., job applications, interviewing skills, and resumes) a smaller group would enable individuals to help one another since goals are so similar. For higher functioning individuals, smaller groups could serve as a tool to practice conversational skills. For U.S. born adult learners this approach would help individuals build a stronger network of support in addition to family and individual service providers.

B1. Recommendation: Define a specific work plan centered on a specific goal or goals for each participant.

C. Recommendations for New Literacy Programs

Participants were asked what services they were currently using to improve their reading skills, and whether there are existing organizations they felt could offer reading and writing services in addition to their current selection. Lastly, we asked the participants for suggestions in developing new literacy programs.

Recommended changes to current services and programs offered included creating smaller groups in which adults can practice reading and speaking. In addition smaller groups would also help individuals to build a stronger network of support and foster a healthy level of accountability for improvement.

Participants expressed a desire for distribution of incentives and recognition for achievements. Many adult learners are ashamed and embarrassed about their low literacy skills, and the addition of incentives and recognition could add a sense of pride.

C1. Recommendation: Create incentive program for all adult learning programs and services.

C2. Recommendation: Enable small group study and opportunities to practice conversational English.

Many adult learners are forced to prioritize their needs and often the need for immediate employment wins out over literacy and learning to speak English. However, adult learners also quickly realize how limited their opportunities are as a result of their low literacy. Participants suggested that a workforce development or apprentice program be created. A program of this nature would help individuals not only prepare for the work place but allow adequate time for studying and practicing English.

C3. Recommendation: Create a comprehensive workforce development program.

Service Providers

"Service providers" is a broad definition; these groups included classroom teachers, librarians, and representatives from various community-based organizations that provide literacy services.

The format for the service provider focus groups was slightly different than the others. Rather than a fully open verbal discussion, we asked a series of four primary questions, and had the participants write their responses on index cards. After each question the participants handed the cards in, they were shuffled, and handed back out. Participants then read a card written by someone else in the group. This approach ensures that all attendees participate, and provides some level of anonymity. After statements are read aloud, there is opportunity for discussion.

A. External Factors

The first question asked for opinions on external factors that affect literacy levels for children, youth and adults. The overarching theme regarding external factors was the essential collaboration needed between the home environment, the community, and the educational system. A concerted effort waged on all three fronts will be necessary for the success of a citywide literacy campaign. A number of themes emerged, as described below.

Limited Access to Books

Participants indicated that many children have limited access to books. In order to improve literacy in Buffalo access to books must be greatly improved in the home, communities, and in the educational system.

Although parents are ideally supposed to be the child's first teacher, some providers felt that literacy is not an apparent priority in some home environments. The following comments help to explain this perception.

"Families with substandard housing, with inability to obtain books."

"A lack of money, poverty, lack of good reading materials in the home."

"Families' lack of access to community resources."

In other words, often parents find themselves merely struggling to keep their families sheltered, clothed, and fed and as a result literacy is not a priority. Other external factors affecting families included *"the pull of the streets"* and the way in which *"violence distracts from learning."*

A1. Recommendation: Provide services through community based organizations and schools to enable families to meet immediate needs (i.e. food, clothing, shelter) so that literacy can remain a priority at all times.

The public library system is an important source of access to books. It was immediately apparent that service providers participating in these focus groups value public libraries and the service they provide to the community.

Some of the frustrations shared regarding this issue included:

"We need to open the closed libraries."

"We need to improve library service (i.e. materials, staffing) to provide access, model reading, stimulate interest, etc."

A2. Recommendation: Reopen all closed libraries or make certain every neighborhood has a public library within walking distance. Or attempt to create substitutes such as reading rooms with donated books and other reading materials.

A3. Recommendation: Recruit librarians that have experience building reading programs to further support the literacy initiatives of the Buffalo Reads collaborative.

Schools continue to struggle to provide age-appropriate reading materials via the school library system. One of the needs that surfaced during the discussion with the service providers included a central clearinghouse for collecting and distributing books to students.

Exacerbating this issue is the absence of some school librarians due to recent layoffs of many school librarians. Not only are in-school libraries without staff to answer questions and create programs that further support learning in the classroom but the resources in the libraries are now subject to theft, vandalism and overall mismanagement.

Furthermore, in the classroom many students are forced to share reading materials among multiple classes, which prevents students from taking books home to read in their leisure time.

A4. Recommendation: Stock school libraries with developmentally appropriate books for children.

A5. Recommendation: Staff school libraries with professionals whose specialties include promoting literacy.

A6. Recommendation: Ensure every child has at least one leisure book at all times.

A7. Recommendation: Multiple class sets of books are needed for work in the classroom and reinforcement outside of the classroom.

Changing Standards/Curriculum Without Providing or Mandating Training

Another area of frustration amongst teachers was the frequent changes in reading curricula used over the years. This causes considerable problems especially when the prior and current curriculums lack compatibility. Engaging new curriculum requires teachers to be retrained but oftentimes this does not occur. As a result teachers are not using the curriculum to its fullest potential. In addition, each curriculum has a different standard or performance measurement and as a result the students are forced to constantly adjust which takes more time and effort from

learning. Curriculum may also vary from one school to another within the school district, so as teachers and students are transferred or move among schools they are forced to conform to a new curriculum and new standards. The feedback shared encouraged a more consistent approach to the curriculum selection process.

A8. Recommendation: Align curriculums and standards across all of the Buffalo Public Schools.

A9. Recommendation: Train all teachers on the new curriculum and standards.

Perceived Lack of Support from Parents

Children will achieve what is modeled for them in the home. In addition, children will adopt principles that are valued by their parents. Unfortunately, some providers feel that reading is not being modeled nor is it assigned much value and as a result students are not performing in this crucial area. Some of the comments shared include:

"Children are coming from families that do not value education, parents had difficult time in school, parents dropped out of school."

"Self-defeating scenarios, high-crime, violence. Family plays a part as well as genetics."

"Lack of parental guidance, children watching too much TV, too many video games, lack of a strict bedtime."

Participants noted that some parents are illiterate or have low literacy levels. Illiterate parents are unable to provide homework assistance or appropriate modeling needed to positively impact their children. Participants also noted that some students are required to act as a parent to younger siblings. The opinions of some of the providers included the following:

"Parents are illiterate."

"Parental support needed. Parents need to have skills to help with literacy; they don't understand simple things done with children at very early ages to help develop early literacy."

"Children have to act as parents to younger siblings."

A10. Recommendation: Support family literacy programs that encourage literacy beginning at birth.

A11. Recommendation: Increase parental modeling—reading and valuing literacy activities.

A12. Recommendation: Create parallel programs to encourage child and adult literacy.

A13. Recommendation: Create and implement parenting skills programs.

A14: Recommendation: Provide parental instruction so that they can provide homework assistance to their children.

"Deprioritization of Learning"

Many of the providers believe the current state of literacy in Buffalo is the result of a culture that does not make learning a priority. General expectations have decreased significantly while mediocrity in the schools has become acceptable. Comments included the following:

"Dumbing down of America."

"Willingness of education system and others to accept mediocrity in our educational system."

"Giving up because there are no opportunities anyway."

"110,000 people over the age of 25 in Erie County are without a high school diploma or equivalent."

A15. Recommendation: Make learning and literacy a priority by creating a holistic campaign that involves the home environment, school system and the community at large.

A16. Recommendation: Target and provide the services needed for adults currently without a high school diploma or GED equivalent.

Many service providers felt successful learning had been abandoned because there was *"no outlet for children, no constructive out of school time."* As stated earlier, a literacy campaign will only be successful if each component supports decisions that foster an environment conducive to successful learning. However, lack of

support is evident when there is an absence of constructive outlets (i.e. public libraries) for children within the community. The decision to close libraries is an example of how learning and literacy has been *deprioritized.*

A17. Recommendation: Develop after school programs geared towards improving literacy for children and families.

Learning Disabilities

Some participants noted that one way successful learning has been neglected is through undiagnosed and untreated learning disabilities in children and adults. In order for this issue to be addressed the community at large needs to be educated regarding learning disabilities and how to properly diagnose and treat a learner with special needs.

A18. Recommendation: Increase awareness within the medical community, social services agencies, and communities to promptly identify learning disabilities in children and adults, and recommend interventions or follow-up.

Funding

Although limited funding was considered part of the problem, many providers simultaneously felt money was being "poured into an ineffective education system without demanding improvement" and there was "no connection between increased funding and improved outcomes." Participants felt that first the community should determine whether the current funding levels are being used effectively to meet the need before requesting additional funding. Other service providers felt dedicated community organizations (i.e. churches) needed to be tapped to specifically address the issue of literacy.

A19. Recommendation: Analyze current literacy funding levels to determine whether waste exists and then reallocate current funding to areas of greatest need.

A20. Recommendation: Identify potential sources of in-kind, non-financial support within the community. Perhaps churches could be used as neighborhood "reading rooms" to provide another constructive outlet for children and adults.

Teacher Resources

Some participants felt that teachers are not receiving proper training, and do not have proper resources to engage students properly.

"Lack of resources to engage students in activity-based education in schools"

"Teachers not well trained in reading outside of certified reading teachers"

"Teachers need to choose training, tools, workshops to become better teachers"

"We need in-service workshops for all teachers on how to teach reading"

Some also described apathy in the school district and among teachers.

"The school district itself is a failing district, not making adequate yearly progress. Does the school take an active role in the community? Do the teachers strive for solutions or only do the bare minimum?"

Others described a need for teacher incentives.

"We need teacher incentives, not just merit pay"

B. Internal Agency Factors

The second focus group question asked participants about any issues or factors internal to their organization that affect literacy, positively or negatively, in the community. Major strengths and challenges faced internally by these organizations are outlined below.

Strengths

Many service providers shared how existing partnerships and collaboratives are a strength for their program. Building partnerships and collaborating allows a number of programs to share the burden of increased expenses, time and energy by sharing best practices. Some described strong communication within their organization/agency as well.

Many focus group participants indicated that teachers or staff are very committed to their work and to the individuals, either children, youth, adults or families, that they serve.

Participants highlighted the need for a family-oriented approach to literacy. Targeting a whole family leads to the success of the entire unit rather than just trying to reach one individual. Families can

then encourage one another. Some comments shared regarding this approach included:

"…encourage parents to be the child's first teacher and support learning."

"…we work with the whole family."

"…working directly with parents and children."

Some participants described the strength and importance of having a research-based program with specific, measurable outcomes. They also mentioned the importance of using literacy programs that are well tested and considered best practices.

Weaknesses

Several challenges or weaknesses within these organizations were also noted. Some service providers shared concerns about not having sufficient staff which often leads to high rates of staff burnout and turnover.

Others remarked that *"reading teachers are currently stretched too thin"* because they are often training and conducting assessments and left without sufficient time to do their work. Reading teachers need more support, especially from their fellow teachers.

Unfortunately *"There are so many other needs before literacy (i.e. employment, resettlement) so literacy programs are put on the backburner."* In addition the *"Growing English as a Second Language ("ESL") Population"* continues to increase rapidly without the proper services and supports needed to make an impact. Other concerns like *"Lack of Funds (i.e. new materials, special projects, field trips)"* and *"Lack of Ongoing Funding Streams"* were also shared.

Current Capacity

Considering the plans for a city-wide literacy campaign, one factor to consider was current capacity. Are agencies in a position to offer increased services in order to meet the potential demand? Unfortunately, many service providers shared that need is currently outweighing the services available and some organizations have long waiting lists. As an example, Literacy Volunteers of America in Buffalo presently has a 200+ person waiting list.

"Program is too small to serve the needs within the community"

"Lack of transportation for our clients hinders sustainable literacy programs"

C. Collaboration

The third major focus group question asked participants about their thoughts on the benefits and challenges involved in collaboration with other organizations in the community.

Benefits

Participants pointed out that in many cases funders require collaborative efforts today. They state that if the collaboration is a complementary relationship, it is absolutely desirable. It can prevent people and organizations from re-inventing the wheel, can ensure that best practices are used more comprehensively, and therefore help to create consistency for the recipients of literacy services. The sentiment was summed up in this comment:

"When you pull together more resources (minds, money, manpower) you have more assets and eventually you end up with more to offer."

Challenges

However, participants also cautioned that agencies must share the same goal to have a successful collaboration. For example, if the goal of one organization is early employment while another agency's goal is increased ESL level, then it could be a mismatch. Nonetheless, one participant stated:

"Sometimes we must look for common ground rather than dwelling on differences."

Participants warned that as in any partnership, in collaboration you give up an element of control "that most of us are more comfortable with." This can be a particular problem, as one participant shared, if the person or agency on the other end is not as determined as you are. For this reason, one participant suggested that:

"Programs need to have a clearinghouse to coordinate services."

Some participants feel that some community based organizations are in "crisis mode" (reactive vs. proactive) and collaboration may simply not be the best first step.

C1. Recommendation: Encourage collaboration among agencies, especially for funding purposes and to facilitate the use of best practices.

D. Recommendations for Change

Our last question for the providers asked about desired changes or improvements, and what could be done to better support and enhance literacy for children, youth and adults. Providers were also asked what single change they would make to promote greater literacy levels.

Some described a need for more staff and/or resources:

- *Full time library staff*

- *Need at least one social worker every day per school*

- *Need social service agency help, the district won't hire a social worker*

- *Additional space for after-hour programs; after school programs, staff and resources*

- *Donations (i.e. CBOs, faith-based orgs etc.) of materials, time, money (ex: a printing company gives us usable paper which is excess stuff for them)*

- *Need sites for family literacy and marketing of programs to community*

Some described a need for more services:

- *Referral services (housing, domestic violence, substance abuse, etc)*

- *Provide comprehensive educational services for children (families) starting at the birth of their child and going to school age (at the very least) and beyond… first 3-4 years of development are the most important*

- *Fund education and community services to address the needs*

And some described a need for a shift in thinking/behavior:

- *Make sure that all families are taught how to work/play with their children AND encourage literacy*

- *Need collaboration between teachers and librarians*

- *Need alignment between kids and school needs and community's contributions*

- *Need principal to write educational objectives and then communicate those things we need from the community and district (perhaps retired teachers could organize this)*

- *Strong advocacy for education on multiple levels from legislative, corporate, administrators, parents, community, etc.*

- *To have all segments of the community understand the level of illiteracy in Buffalo and its effects on upward mobility, economic and family stability*

D1. Recommendation: Engage experts in the literacy community to generate new ideas for change.

CLOSING

We talked with a diverse group of individuals, ranging in age, race, gender, and perspective.

All expressed the importance of literacy, and most expressed a desire to improve their, or their children's, or the community's literacy skills. While no single set of services will fit all needs, the findings from the focus groups may help a re-design of existing services or the new design of services to be more effective.

APPENDIX—FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

FOCUS GROUPS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Current Reading Habits

- What are you reading right now/what's the last thing you read? (Is/was it for school or for pleasure?)
- Do you read books? Magazines (which ones)? Newspapers (which ones)? Read on the Internet? [show of hands for each?]
- Do you see your parents or siblings read? What do they read? Do they encourage you to read?
- Is it cool for people to see you reading?

What do you think about reading?

- On a scale of 1-10, how much do you like to read?
- Is reading or writing (ever) fun? Why or why not?
- What do you like to read about? What don't you like to read about?
- Are there times when you find reading difficult? What makes it difficult?
- Do you think reading is important? Why? How does reading you do today affect your future?

What can we do differently?

- If you were to design a reading or writing program, what would it be like?
- How would you convince your friends to come?
- You say you're bored, so if you were teacher for a day, how would you teach your peers?
- What would make you want to read more? I would read more if….

FOCUS GROUP WITH PARENTS

[Define reading as reading (de-coding), understanding what they've read, writing, being able to analyze written material and write a summary, speaking, ability to think through and solve problems.]

1. Is reading important to your child's success in school? Why is reading important?

2. (For pre-school age)What are the most important activities you can do for your child to prepare for school success—both academic and social?

3. How are your children doing with reading? What do they like to read? Are they reading at grade level or do they need help?

    a. What motivates or encourages your children to enjoy reading?

    b. What are the barriers or things that keep them from reading more?

4. What are the most important things <u>parents</u> can do to help their children with reading?

    a. Is there anything that keeps parents from helping their children with reading?

5. Are there things the <u>schools</u> can do to better work with parents, (i.e., better communication about your child's progress, where/how you can get help, what they're expected to know and be able to do in their current grade, after-school programs, etc.)?

6. How can the <u>community</u> help children to be excellent readers? What supports can neighbors, friends, faith-based organizations and community organizations provide to ensure your child's success with reading?

FOCUS GROUP WITH ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

1. What do you read (any language) for fun? Books? Magazines? Newspapers? Internet?

    a.   What do you read in English for fun?

2. When is reading (English) fun and enjoyable? What do you like to read about?

3. When is reading (English) particularly difficult? What are the barriers that keep you from learning English or make it difficult?

4. What life experiences have affected your ability to read and write?

5. What services do you use now to improve your reading?

    a.   How could those be changed to work better for you?

6. Are there other organizations in the city that you wish would offer reading and writing services? (probe)

7. If you were to start a new reading and writing program for people like you (your friends and family) what would it be like? Where would it be held? When? What type of activities would it involve?

External Factors

- **CARD 1** What external factors are affecting literacy levels of children, youth and adults in Buffalo?
- **CARD 1**: How do you think we can best address these factors as a community?

Internal Agency Factors

- **CARD 2** What are the greatest <u>internal</u> strengths of your agency in addressing the needs of your targeted learners?
- **CARD 2** What are the greatest <u>internal</u> challenges your agency faces in addressing the needs of your targeted learners?

Staffing
What are your issues, if any with:
      <u>Paid Staff</u> – recruiting qualified staff, skills training / staff development
      <u>Volunteers</u> - recruiting / qualifications / hiring / training

Funding?

Quality Standards
Do you have quality standards in place? If so, give some examples?

Best Practices (with documented outcomes)
What are they? How are they, or can they best be shared with other literacy providers?

Outcomes
How does your agency measure learner outcomes for funders, for your boards?

Capacity
Do you currently have the capacity to accept more learners in your programs/services?

Inter-Agency Collaboration
CARD 3: Do you see inter-agency collaboration as possible, desirable? What are the upsides, i.e., the positive benefits to be gained? What are the downsides, i.e., the challenges?

Suggestions
CARD 4: What suggestions do you have about how to better support and enhance literacy for children, youth and adults? If you could accomplish one thing to promote greater literacy levels, what would it be?

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