

Building a Culture of Educational Success Through Housing

Prepared for NeighborWorks America
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INTRODUCTION

“We want to present to the community and to all of our constituencies—including potential tenants—that we are about more than just housing. In everything we’re putting out there, we’re talking not only about housing but also about what we’re doing in terms of afterschool and education generally and about trying to create communities that are about opportunity and success.”

Julian Huerta, Foundation Communities

“The world knows how to build housing, how to rebuild it, how to manage it, how to run rental assistance programs. The world knows how to house people when it stirs itself. The harder part of our job is what the world doesn’t know nearly enough about: how you spend a housing dollar to get other outcomes.”

Michael Mirra, Tacoma Housing Authority

In January 2014, NeighborWorks America (NeighborWorks) embarked on a partnership with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to conduct a national scan of strategies that utilize affordable housing as a platform for educational success. The scan focused on identifying promising programs that are (i) sponsored by a housing development, (ii) focused on educational outcomes and (iii) have demonstrated effectiveness. The project was guided by several principles about the potential for housing providers to make a contribution to educational outcomes, by offering:

- Space that could be used to create safe, constructive out-of-school environments;
- A target population of children who would benefit from additional academic supports; and
- Access to families that could facilitate parent engagement and two-generation approaches.

Interviews with NeighborWorks members and other housing providers with an interest in education revealed a community of practitioners that view resident services as a core part of their missions. They are motivated by the goal of promoting economic mobility and ensuring that residents’ children have the ability to pursue their aspirations, regardless of where they grow up.

The first phase of the scan identified several bright spots of promising practice and generated important insights about implementing, evaluating and scaling education strategies in housing settings. Interviews pointed to a continuum of academic interventions, ranging from general supports to outcome-driven programs to systems-change efforts. Exploration across this spectrum suggested that increasing outcome-driven education programming has the broadest immediate application across the NeighborWorks network.

Following a presentation of early findings at a convening of resident services staff, NeighborWorks members expressed an interest in narrowing the scan to focus on promising early learning and literacy programs. With many young children in residence at properties operated by NeighborWorks members, implementing programs aimed at promoting school readiness and grade-level reading stood out as a compelling opportunity to build strong early learning foundations and set children on a positive education trajectory.

This paper describes both phases of work: summary findings about the link between housing and education and the state of current practice, as well as profiles of early learning and literacy programs that could be implemented at greater scale.¹

THE LINK BETWEEN HOUSING AND EDUCATION

“We are absolute believers that housing policy is educational policy and educational policy is housing policy. How the housing resources get planned and delivered has an enormous impact on whether schools are going to be successful and whether ultimately you’re able to build a healthy and sustainable neighborhood.”

Carol Naughton, Purpose Built Communities

Research and National Leadership

Researchers and practitioners alike have long noted the power of place - both housing and neighborhoods – to influence a host of other social and economic outcomes. The zip code in which a child is born has tremendous influence on his/her educational prospects, and children in high-quality, stable, affordable housing are more likely to succeed academically. The impact of housing stability on educational success is one of the strongest findings in the literature: reducing student mobility promotes better educational outcomes for both children and schools.²

In the education and human services literature, a second strand of research related to parent engagement and two-generation strategies has emerged. As articulated by Robert Giloth of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, two-generation strategies reflect the theory that “when families have access to high-quality early education and supports for children, assistance to strengthen parents’ caregiving skills and tools to improve their economic standing, the outcomes for both will improve.”³ Acknowledging that parent and caregiver engagement is integral to improving child well-being adds another connection between people and place. Housing providers have a unique point of access to families that can be used to engage parents and children in opportunities that provide learning for both of them. The need for efforts to improve educational outcomes for children outside the classroom is bolstered by the recognition that “children spend only 20 percent of their waking time annually in formal classroom education,” making expanded learning in non-school settings even more important.⁴

¹ This paper was informed by interviews with key informants—including housing providers, education practitioners and funders and policy experts—and related background reading. See appendix for list of interview participants and works cited.

² See Maya Brennan, Center for Housing Policy, [The Impacts of Affordable Housing on Education: A Research Summary](#) and [The Impacts of Affordable Housing on Education: Annotated Bibliography](#), 2011.

³ For more information on the research and practice behind two-generation strategies, see Janice M. Gruendel, “[Two \(or More\) Generation Frameworks: A Look Across and Within](#),” 2014.

⁴ See M. Elena Lopez and Margaret Caspe, Harvard Family Research Project, “[Family Engagement in Anywhere, Anytime Learning](#),” June 2014.

The potential of housing as a platform for educational success and family engagement has increased interest in developing more integrated practice and policy.⁵ However, the evidence base to date focuses more on the relationship between housing characteristics (e.g., stability, quality, affordability, etc.) and academic achievement than the effectiveness of particular housing-education strategies. Interview participants concurred that research into how to use housing as a platform for education programming and lever for systems change is in its early stages.

Federal funding through neighborhood revitalization programs has provided a recent catalyst for ambitious housing-education efforts. In a public housing context, the Choice Neighborhoods Program (Choice) is emblematic of the current philosophy. The focus is not only on improving the built environment and transforming public housing and neighborhoods but also “on improving educational outcomes and intergenerational mobility for youth.”⁶ Building upon the lessons of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s past Hope VI initiative, Choice has raised the visibility and energy around the potential for housing to serve as a platform for educational success.⁷

Private and nonprofit developers have been active partners in redeveloping public housing and transforming neighborhoods. Many of these efforts have included a strong emphasis on creating new educational opportunities and partnering with local schools. For instance, in the Murphy Park neighborhood in St. Louis, McCormack Baron Salazar and Urban Strategies recently partnered to open the I. Jerome and Rosemary Flance Early Childhood Center. The Flance Center offers a range of early learning opportunities and family and caregiver supports, all designed to close the achievement gap at the preschool level. Another Urban Strategies program, “Succeeding with Reading,” leverages partnerships with neighborhood schools to address the third-grade reading slump among low-income students.

Public housing authorities have also led the way in catalyzing a variety of innovative housing-education initiatives.⁸ For instance, in Washington State, the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) has launched an ambitious Education Project. One of its centerpiece initiatives, the McCarver Elementary School Special Housing Program, provides rental assistance and intensive case management to homeless families with children enrolled in kindergarten, first or second grade.⁹ This two-generation approach is aimed at reducing student mobility and improving educational outcomes at McCarver Elementary School. As Michael Mirra of THA explains:

⁵ See the John D. and Katherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s “[How Housing Matters Strategy](#)” for an example of one of the leading efforts in the field to use research to inform policy and practice.

⁶ [Choice Neighborhoods](#) is one of the programs included in the [White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative](#) (NRI), an inter-agency effort informed by the recognition that: “Struggling schools, little access to capital, high unemployment, poor housing, persistent crime, and other challenges that feed into and perpetuate each other call for an integrated approach so residents can reach their full potential.”

⁷ For more information about the Hope VI program, click [here](#).

⁸ For examples of public housing authorities’ work in education, see the Center for Large Public Housing Authorities, [Bringing Education Home: Housing Authorities and Learning Initiatives](#), 2012.

⁹ For more information on two-generation approaches using an intensive case management approach managed directly in public housing settings, see the Urban Institute’s [Housing Opportunities and Services Together Demonstration](#).

“We’re interested in education for three reasons. The first reason arises from our mission and how we understand our job. Our job is to house people and help them prosper so that their time with us is transforming and temporary. Certainly for the parents but emphatically for the children because we don’t wish to house them when they grow up. We count educational success an important part of that transformation.

The second reason is that we are real estate developers. We develop properties in communities that will not succeed financially or socially unless the schools that serve them succeed.

The third reason [...] is that the school districts need help. We judge that they will not [otherwise] succeed in their educational metrics because children who grow up in deep poverty bring challenges to the school house door that the fanciest classroom headed by the best trained teacher will not overcome [alone].”

THA funds the program through a combination of federal and local sources. Notably, the Tacoma School District is paying the cost of the case managers as an investment in reducing student mobility.¹⁰ The district’s willingness to invest in this THA-led effort stems from their belief that it will improve their own performance. As Erika Poethig from the Urban Institute observed, engaging schools and districts in partnerships with housing developers requires “getting inside their head and [thinking about] what is motivating them: what are the issues, pain points and concerns that [...] can be solved through a housing intervention.”

As Michael Mirra noted, THA’s investment in education stems from a combination of mission and business imperatives. According to Sandra Moore of Urban Strategies, both incentives are important: “At the end of the day, if they [housers] can’t tie it to something that is related to their bottom line, they don’t have a way to justify paying for it over the long haul.” However, management considerations alone cannot drive program success. Housing providers must also “understand how housing anchors a family and can be the launch pad for individual and family change.”

Interview participants affirmed that housers are well positioned to contribute to student success. Many housers have community rooms and/or rent space to service providers, motivated by the desire to meet resident needs like child care and offer a safe place for children and youth. However, co-location in and of itself does not fully leverage housing’s unique potential to serve as an educational platform. Interview participants spoke of the opportunity to build a culture of learning that engages residents, particularly parents of young children, in a community that promotes academic success. Sandra Moore of Urban Strategies elaborated:

“The most important [contribution of housing providers] is the creation of a value that learning is as essential as housing. That is the message that gets sent. It’s a very important one because in many of the households we work in, learning has not been seen as

¹⁰ According to an evaluation supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, McCarver Elementary School’s annual student mobility rate declined from 107% prior to THA’s initiative down to 96% after the first year and down further to 75% after the second year. For more information on THA’s Education Project, click [here](#).

essential. So the first thing is create that value. The second thing is ...you've got access to people. You can talk to them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week around education and learning.”

As Moore's comment underscores, housers can reach a population of children who might not otherwise have opportunities to pursue educational enrichment, while offering a single point of access in a well-known safe place to students who may benefit from targeted interventions.

At the same time, housers can leverage their access to families to build trust and relationships with parents and caregivers. As Judy Langford of CSSP's Strengthening Families initiative observed, “That means making sure that programs don't have a tin ear to the realities of families' lives, like neighborhood safety concerns and parents' own experiences that have formed their perspectives, including various kinds of trauma and [school] failure.” Strategies designed to engage parents in their children's learning—either directly as a core program component or indirectly as key supports—require investments in the staffing and time needed to build ownership with families and make sure that programming reflects their priorities and concerns.

Current Practice

A scan of current practice identified three categories of efforts at the nexus of housing and education: general supports, outcome-driven programs and systems-change efforts. At one end of the continuum are general supports, a common starting point for housing providers and the most prevalent category in current practice. According to interview participants, many housing developments offer afterschool activities; however, the majority of these efforts function more as drop-in programs that keep children safe or informal tutoring programs than evidence-informed strategies designed to significantly increase academic achievement. Housers that provide general supports often have limited staffing and funding to engage in more robust efforts. However, they may be well positioned to implement outcome-driven programming if offered additional resources or guidance.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the systems-change efforts exemplified by the Tacoma Housing Authority's Education Project described earlier. This category of practice aims not only to improve student achievement but also to transform educational policies and institutions. Systems-change efforts include high-touch service approaches such as caseworkers who connect families with comprehensive and coordinated supports. They may also include strategies to develop a cradle to college pipeline that extends across a child's stages of development.¹¹ For example, at Purpose Built Communities, Carol Naughton explained that educational offerings “start with extraordinarily high quality early learning [...] and link children seamlessly all the way through elementary, high school and college.” The complexity of systems-change efforts requires close working relationships with schools and school districts who are willing to do

¹¹ The [Promise Neighborhoods](#) program, another flagship effort of the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, has increased the visibility of efforts to build cradle to college and career pipelines. The program has a strong focus on fostering diverse education-community partnerships. Its vision is that children “have access to great schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and a career.”

business differently. Public housing authorities and well-financed private developers are among the most common actors in this arena, supported by significant resources and funding flexibility.

Interview participants emphasized that not all housers have the capacity to work directly with educational institutions or to construct a pipeline of educational opportunities. Public housing authorities and participants in large-scale neighborhood revitalization efforts have considerable resources and relationships compared to other housers, including staff with specialized backgrounds and the time and acumen to navigate institutional politics. Moreover, fostering collaboration across institutions and systems requires willing partners. According to Michael Power at THA, “one of the most significant challenges [to doing this work] is finding partners who are committed to shared outcomes [and] are willing to change the way they do things to get those outcomes.” Partnerships are often the result of unique opportunities and institutional interests that are difficult to replicate across communities.

Findings from the scan suggests that the middle category of practice, outcome-driven programs, is the most promising entry point for most NeighborWorks members. Outcome-driven programs have a well-defined model or theory of change that aims to make a measurable difference on student achievement. While many of these programs are organized around particular academic subjects, they often aspire to promote positive youth development along with academic skills. Outcome-driven programs are supported by an array of different staffing and organizational models. For instance, some housing developers contract with external education providers or hire program staff with specialized academic expertise. In other cases, resident service coordinators deliver programming on site, with the help of standardized curricula or support materials that do not require an education background to implement.

Many housers that currently provide outcome-driven programs started by providing general supports. For instance, according to Julian Huerta at Foundation Communities, “We’ve been doing afterschool programming for 20 years. [...] For the first half of that time, our programs could be characterized as drop-in programs, where the objective was keeping kids safe and engaged in something positive, but not necessarily focused on educational advancement.” As Foundation Communities built capacity and trust with parents over time and made a more intentional commitment to focus on educational advancement, they transitioned toward a more focused and strategic approach. Following the same trajectory, as NeighborWorks members build their capacity to deliver outcomes-driven programs and establish relationships with local partners and residents, there may be potential to pursue more ambitious systems-change efforts in the future.

Evidence of Success

Implementing outcome-driven programs at greater scale across the NeighborWorks network requires developing a common understanding of what success might look like. However, the diversity of affordable housing providers argues against constructing too narrow a conception of how to define and measure effectiveness. In reality, depending on program focus, partners and internal capacity, housers range in their approach to performance measurement and evaluation.

Some housers have close relationships and data-sharing agreements with local schools, allowing them to use measures such as report cards, promotion rates and standardized test scores to gauge student achievement. For instance, after receiving a 21st Century Learning Community Center grant, Foundation Communities took a leap forward with their data collection and reporting efforts.¹² As Julian Huerta explained:

“That grant requires schools to share certain data with us about our kids. In addition to report cards, we also get a report about all of the standardized test scores that our kids took and how they did in comparison to the rest of the school and to a demographically similar group in the district. So that’s for test scores, that’s for school attendance, behavior referrals, promotion rates, and one or two other [measures]. Having that data specifically about our kids has definitely helped us to make the case that we’re making a difference.”

In the case of Foundation Communities, data about students’ academic performance enabled them to determine “what are the areas that kids are most struggling with and which of those areas we can [address] in an afterschool setting that will help them do better.” According to Huerta, this process informed Foundation Communities’ decision to incorporate a strong focus on reading into afterschool programming.

Other interview participants, while not discounting measures of academic performance, emphasized the potential to capture a broader set of outcomes than typically measured in school-based settings. Susan Neufeld from Bridge Housing urged the importance of looking beyond academic instruction to also focus on “education engagement, mastery, task persistence—these executive function kinds of skill sets that actually help children succeed in school [...]”¹³ Bridge Communities is currently in the midst of designing a new afterschool strategy, which embraces a holistic approach that responds to the realities—both challenges and strengths—of children’s families and communities. “My dream,” said Neufeld, “is to create a program that embraces all types of learners and validates all types of learning, whether it’s learning about self, learning about emotion regulation, or learning about reading and writing.” What ties the Foundation Communities and Bridge Housing perspectives together is a shared commitment to defining outcomes at the onset of programming. A willingness to gather data for the purpose of learning and accountability is critical to delivering effective programs.

As previously mentioned, evaluations of education programs deployed in housing contexts are in their early stages. For instance, at The Community Builders, Talmira Hill reported that developments are “piloting and carrying out evidence-based strategies in their sites that have been tried elsewhere, but they are just beginning to accumulate data on their own programs.” This was a common theme in the interviews, and participants acknowledged that as programs

¹² The 21st Century Learning Community Center [grant program](#) “supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools.” While funded through the Department of Education, grants are administered at the state-level.

¹³ For more information about executive functioning, see the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, “[Key Concepts: Executive Function](#),” (web resource).

gather data, it will be important to assess if evidence-informed programs are performing as expected in a housing environment.

However, many participants emphasized that data limitations pose challenges to assessment. To the extent that housers implementing education programming do receive data from education partners, it is often only in the aggregate, limiting their ability to track individual student outcomes and adjust their programming accordingly. The timing of data receipt can hinder real-time learning, and it can be difficult for practitioners to isolate the impact of programs on students' academic achievement. John Forsyth, who manages education strategies at the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) explained, "I think the thing we are struggling with is how you successfully measure school data to show a program is impacting the student's [performance]."

The question of what standard of evidence is considered sufficient or useful often confronts innovative practitioners looking to push beyond the boundaries of current practice. When it comes to emergent, multidisciplinary efforts, Lisbeth Schorr and Frank Farrow of the Center for the Study of Social Policy highlight the need to value a more inclusive evidence base.¹⁴ They write:

"The idea that nothing is worth knowing unless you know it for certain has its place, but not when applied to complex social programs and policies. We can learn so much, including about program effectiveness, without insisting on absolute proof. Valuable 'real-time' learning can be generated from complex interventions as part of the day-to-day management of the work by developing a results framework that focuses on well-being outcomes for children and families; tracking progress toward those results; and using the data to continuously shape, drive, and improve efforts."

Using a results framework leaves space for implementation actors to adapt strategies to local needs and experiment with new approaches, without losing a focus on assessment and learning. By focusing on results, NeighborWorks can unite members around common goals and help identify strategies that have the potential to make a difference on indicators of success.

EARLY LEARNING AND LITERACY BRIGHT SPOTS

"Early experiences in childhood lay the foundation for later success. The relationships, environments, and supports that children experience have a profound impact on their development because critical neurological and biological systems grow most rapidly in these earliest years. Throughout early childhood, from birth through age eight, children need early, consistent, high-quality supports to promote and sustain their developmental gains."

*The Research Base for a Birth through Eight State Policy Framework*¹

¹⁴ See Lisbeth Schorr and Frank Farrow, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, "[Expanding the Evidence Universe: Doing Better By Knowing More](#)," December 2011.

“There are no infants who read to themselves or speak words to themselves. There are no preschoolers who get up and make breakfast and go to school on their own. There are no first graders who ask themselves, ‘how was your day today,’ and offer themselves a book. [...]. Early education has to be rooted in family education, and there has to be some approach or program that taps an adult caregiver.”

Sandra Moore, Urban Strategies

Focusing the Scan

Support organizations like NeighborWorks can play a critical role in rallying members around a results framework in service of shared educational goals. Whether experimenting with new approaches or implementing tried and true programming, focusing on results helps diverse actors move toward a common destination. With results comes agreement on goals and discussion of how sites will know change when they see it. This approach also includes flexibility to engage residents and local partners in determining what is needed. According to Martin Blank of the Institute for Educational Leadership, the key is “being clear about what people really want or need and designing it in a way that is responsive to their needs and their cultural context and plays to their strengths and their circumstances.” This can help ensure that strategies “are driven by the needs and demographics of the sites, the capacities and capabilities of staff and existing resources in the community to support these needs,” as Talmira Hill of The Community Builders noted.

With this end in mind, the second phase of the scan narrowed to focus on two results for children at NeighborWorks properties: school readiness and grade-level reading.¹⁵ This choice was informed by the large number of young children on NeighborWorks properties, as well as the importance of early learning and literacy efforts to building a strong foundation for educational success. Genevieve Collins from Istation reinforced this point, “Sometimes the kids who live in these communities are going into really low performing schools that don’t necessarily have the best teachers available, and they’re coming to school with minimal vocabulary, so we are setting them up not to succeed from the beginning.” Interview participants consistently expressed their belief that housers can play an integral role in interrupting that dynamic.

The importance of early learning and literacy efforts is reinforced by research across a variety of domains. Studies show that the years between birth through age eight are critical for cognitive, language and socio-emotional development, and early learning and literacy interventions are particularly important for children growing up in low-income families. According to Child Trends and the Alliance for Early Success, “the gap in skill development between advantaged and more disadvantaged children emerges as early as nine months of age and is predictive of academic trajectories through later schooling.”¹⁶ NeighborWorks members house a target

¹⁵ For more information on the research behind school readiness, see Briana Chan, the Harvard Family Research Project, [Resource Guide for Early Childhood Transitions: Annotated Bibliography](#), September 2011. For more information on the research behind grade-level reading, see Leila Fiester, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, [Early Warning Confirmed: A Research Update on Third-Grade Reading](#), 2013.

¹⁶ See Child Trends and the Alliance for Early Success, [The Research Base for a Birth Through Eight State Policy Framework](#) and [The Research Base for a Birth Through Eight State Policy Framework: Research at A Glance](#), 2013.

population of young children who can particularly benefit from robust programming that enhances their literacy and language development.

The opportunity to implement early learning and literacy programs in housing settings also takes advantage of one of the most unique features of a housing environment: relationships with parents and caregivers. As Susan Neufeld of Bridge Housing emphasized, “Part of what makes an education strategy successful is the involvement of parents. [...] By serving kids where they live, we have an access point that I think most education institutions would find enviable.” Engagement with parents is most successful when it begins pre-birth and continues throughout a child’s education. Nina Sazer O’Donnell with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading noted, “What kids really need [...] is to have a healthy birth, [which requires] prenatal care and nutrition for the mother. And after they’re born, they need health care and good nutrition and to be in environments where the adults can be consistently loving and have the ability to follow kids’ interest and encourage them.”¹⁷

For the purpose of the scan, exploration into bright spots of promising practice focused on identifying outcome-driven programs that are explicitly designed to impact school readiness and grade-level reading and have some evidence of success. The scan identified four potential programs:

- **Kaleidoscope Play and Learn Groups** build parents and caregivers’ capacity to support healthy development so that children are prepared to succeed in school and life.
- **AfterSchool Kidzlit** is a reading and enrichment program designed for out-of-school settings that increases young people’s motivation to read and builds their literacy skills.
- **Istation Reading** is a digital learning program that assesses core reading skills and provides customized, computer-adaptive instruction for individual students.
- **Raising A Reader** is an early literacy and family engagement program that helps families develop, practice and sustain home literacy routines.

These bright spots are not mutually exclusive but rather illustrative of how a variety of evidence-informed programs implemented at NeighborWorks sites could promote school readiness and grade-level reading.¹⁸

¹⁷ As Nina Sazer O’Donnell’s quote illustrates, at very early ages, the distinction between health and educational strategies recedes. Informed by this insight, NeighborWorks may want to consider incorporating a focus on prenatal interventions, such as [home visiting programs](#), and subsequent [developmental screenings](#) for children into their ongoing consideration of health strategies.

¹⁸ The content for the bright spots profiles incorporates excerpts of materials provided by sponsoring organizations, as well as original content.

Bright Spot Profile: Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Groups

Developed by Child Care Resources¹⁹

Core Elements

Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Groups are weekly facilitated play groups for young children and their parents and caregivers. Each group has a trained facilitator who plans and sets up fun, culturally- and developmentally-appropriate play activities for the children and their caregivers to participate in together. Through facilitator guidance and modeling, conversation, peer learning and hands-on experience, caregivers (e.g., parents, grandparents, babysitters, etc.) learn what they can do at home to support children's learning and healthy development.

Most groups are free, drop-in and open to young children of all ages, although many groups focus on children ages zero to five. Groups meet weekly for 90 minutes or more. Depending on the target population of participants, groups can be held in different languages. The program has a particular focus on engaging "Family, Friend and Neighbor caregivers," the relatives and family friends who take care of young children while their parents are at work.

Research Base and Evidence of Success

Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Groups are designed to build the protective and promotive factors that research shows are essential to building strong families that promote optimal child development.²⁰ In addition to providing parents and caregivers with information and resources that builds their knowledge of high quality child care and healthy development, the groups help facilitate social connections among neighbors and inform participants about other services and supports in the community.

The program is based on widely accepted theories and best practices in the fields of child development, early learning and parent and caregiver education. Key findings from a pilot evaluation show positive effects for both children and caregivers.²¹ For instance, children who attended groups with their caregivers demonstrated significant growth in their social-emotional and pre-literacy development, and caregivers exhibited an increase in the quality of their positive interaction with children. In 2013, Kaleidoscope Play & Learn was designated as a Promising Practice by the University of Washington's Evidence-Based Practice Institute.

Infrastructure and Resources

Kaleidoscope Play & Learn groups are run by a network of affiliate organizations and community groups. Child Care Resources, the organization which developed the model, provides affiliates with the training, tools and guidelines needed to launch and run successful groups in their local communities, as well as consultation on all aspects of program planning, outreach, facilitation and evaluation. Affiliates are required to participate in quality assurance activities to ensure fidelity to the model.

¹⁹ For more information about Child Care Resources, click [here](#).

²⁰ To learn more about the protective factors, see The Center for the Study of Social Policy, "[The Protective Factors Framework](#)."

²¹ The pilot study report is available upon request from Child Care Resources. The most [recent year-end evaluation](#) can be accessed here.

Facilitators are supported by training, lesson guides and tool kits but have considerable flexibility around content and delivery.²² According to Paula Steinke of Child Care Resources, “That the facilitator comes from that neighborhood and that culture is [...] even more preferable than having any early learning experience.” The goal is to design what happens in each group session around what participants find most relevant. Many affiliates are connected to local early learning partners who provide facilitators with supervision and professional development.

Operating costs range from \$7,500 to \$10,000 a year, and the primary cost is the facilitator’s time to run the program and engage in planning and related professional development. Materials costs are minimal by design. According to Steinke, groups are encouraged to buy some basic, high quality toys but to focus on incorporating objects “that families are going to find in their own homes or their own neighborhoods [...] to demonstrate that early learning happens everywhere.” There are additional affiliate fees for organizations outside of the State of Washington, which range based on the size and scope of the arrangement.

Affiliates primarily rely on grants, but when possible include program costs in relevant contracts with public agencies. As Steinke explained, “There can be a pathway where you may start out with grant funding, and then over time, as people see the success and your partnerships develop, organizations are more able to spread the cost among existing programs. So it becomes part of your core services and your bottom line.”

Implications for Scaling in NeighborWorks Sites

The Kaleidoscope Play & Learn approach reflects the importance of parents and caregivers as children’s first teachers and aligns with national momentum around ensuring all children enter school ready to learn. Flexibility in program design and delivery ensures that program content and activities are responsive to participants’ interests and cultures. However, specification of essential program components ensures rigor. As Paula Steinke of Child Care Resources explained, “There are those things that have to happen in each group session that we’ve found are what makes it effective through our outcomes and evaluation, but [we tell facilitators] to build that around whatever this particular group of individuals is going through and what’s important to them.”

Child Care Resources has developed an evidence base and support materials specifically aimed at enabling replication in varied settings. Groups have been held in a variety of contexts, including public housing authorities and apartment buildings. There are about 100 groups right now across the state of Washington, in rural, suburban and urban locations. Out-of-state affiliates are active in Iowa and North Carolina. Child Care Resources is enthusiastic about expanding their affiliate network nationally; however, they acknowledge that increasing the scale of technical assistance and support they provide would require additional capacity building and resource development for their organization.

²² To read the Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Guidelines, click [here](#).

Bright Spot Profile: AfterSchool Kidzlit

Developed by Developmental Studies Center²³

Core Elements

AfterSchool KidzLit (Kidzlit) is a reading enrichment program designed specifically for use in out-of-school settings. It increases young people’s motivation to read and builds their literacy skills, while developing core values of helpfulness, fairness, personal responsibility and respect for others. Program leaders use a five-part process in which children hear books read aloud—or read them independently—and make connections to their own lives. Children are encouraged to express their feelings and engage with ideas through discussion, drama, art, movement and writing.

The early reading curriculum focuses on children from kindergarten through third grade, although materials are available for children up to eighth grade. While the curriculum and books are not customized for English as a Second Language (ESL) students, various aspects of the program are designed to support their success in school, including an emphasis on building vocabulary and background knowledge. Typically, the program is offered two or three times per week, with the length of each session ranging from 30 to 90 minutes.

Research Base and Evidence of Success

Kidzlit aligns with research about the most effective ways to promote literacy, including listening to good literature, encouraging discussion and providing exposure to rich language. The curriculum has been designed to improve reading comprehension and vocabulary, in addition to motivation and enjoyment of reading. The program is aligned with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) standards.

Kidzlit has demonstrated success in other community settings, and Mercy Housing (Mercy) is currently testing it for effectiveness in an affordable housing setting.²⁴ Jennifer Covert, Director of Programs and Evaluation at Mercy, explained, “This is a way to put something in place that hopefully we can prove works [...], and then people won’t have to reinvent the wheel, and their energy and time can go to higher impact work rather than developing their own programming.”

Mercy is piloting Kidzlit at 11 properties in California, focusing on children in kindergarten to fifth grade. They have developed a customized evaluation, which will include pre- and post-tests assessing Kidzlit’s participants’ outcomes in comparison with children at 13 control sites enrolled in Mercy’s typical out-of-school time offerings. The evaluation will assess program outcomes and examine variables like duration, dosage and frequency. Results from the pilot’s first year are currently forthcoming.

Infrastructure and Resources

Kidzlit does not require specialized education or literacy experience to deliver, and a staff to child ratio of at least 20 to 1 is recommended. Program materials include children’s books, leader’s guides and handbooks that provide suggestions for activities and discussion questions that encourage students to connect the stories with their own lives. The curriculum is intended to

²³ For more information about the Developmental Studies Center, click [here](#).

²⁴ For Afterschool KidLitz evaluation results, click [here](#).

be flexible so that staff can tailor the amount of time they spend on each book and related activities to the interest and skill level of the children.

Pricing ranges from \$1,750 for a complete kindergarten – third-grade package, which includes 80 books, guides and handbooks, to \$230 for smaller sets offered in increments of 10 books. The Developmental Studies Center offers in-person training for \$2000/day, although a free online course can be used as an alternative or reinforcement. Sites can also purchase an on-site support kit (\$270) which has agendas, PowerPoints and everything program managers need to run a staff training themselves.²⁵

According to Megan Green of the Developmental Studies Center, Kidzlit is most often funded through foundation support or 21st Century Learning Center grants. The Developmental Studies Center offers a funding template that sites can customize and adapt when applying for grants, as well as relevant links to searchable databases that may be useful in the search for financing.²⁶ Mercy is funding their pilot with existing resources, including staff time, but they hope to solicit additional funding to scale the program after the pilot concludes.

Implications for Scaling in NeighborWorks Sites

Kidzlit was developed to be implemented by staff without specialized education backgrounds. According to Alvin Tuvilla of Mercy, “We were really noticing throughout the years that the quality of the programs were driven by the experiences and ability of staff. We needed to figure out a way to offer more consistent education programs, and [one response was] using a curriculum that [...] was really easy for anyone to look at the materials and execute it across the board.” Resident Service Coordinators at Mercy sites administer the program, supported by central staff that work for Mercy Housing in California. Depending on the program site and staffing levels, volunteers are also utilized. For instance, in Sacramento, Mercy has a contract with federal work-study students at local colleges.

The Developmental Studies Center provides training materials that can be delivered on-site, but there is need for an ongoing source of support and oversight. Mercy addressed this need by creating a fidelity checklist and site visit process to make sure staff deliver the curriculum according to intended design. The oversight process helps ensure program effectiveness while providing an opportunity for staff to engage in skill-building and real-time learning. Mercy’s pilot will generate useful insights about how variables like staffing numbers and structure affect program quality.

Bright Spot Profile: Istation Reading

Developed by Istation²⁷

Core Elements

Istation Reading is a digital learning program that delivers individualized instruction with age-appropriate content for students. Using Istation's Indicators of Progress technology and continuous progress monitoring, the curriculum is adjusted automatically to every child's

²⁵ For more information on Kidzlit pricing, click [here](#).

²⁶ For the Kidzlit funding template and financing links, click [here](#).

²⁷ For more information about Istation, click [here](#).

individual ability. The program incorporates lively animations and characters that engage young children. In addition to its online offerings, Istation offers resource materials and lesson guides that can be used for off-line, direct instruction.

Istation's early reading program focuses on children in pre-kindergarten through third-grade, although programs are also available for older students (up to 12th grade). In an afterschool setting, early reading students typically go on Istation two to three times per week for 20 minutes. Istation has a customized program for Spanish speakers, Reading en Español, which offers focused, supplemental reading education with cultural and cross-curricular connections.

Research Base and Evidence of Success

Istation for early readers focuses on the areas of reading development that research shows are critical to literacy, including phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency. According to Genevieve Collins of Istation, "We're really starting at the earliest grade levels and building a solid foundation for those students so that as they continue to move up in grade levels, they have a strong foundation to build their literacy house upon." National research-based standards, such as the Common Core, are integrated into instruction. Istation assessments have been shown to predict kindergarten readiness and subsequent student performance on a range of standardized reading tests.²⁸

Istation itself is intended to be used as an assessment tool for student reading. Ongoing progress monitoring on a monthly basis provides a built-in evaluation to gauge program efficacy. In non-school based settings, Istation helps programs measure student progress without having to rely on school data. Data reports can be generated for individual students, program sites and/or entire initiatives.

Infrastructure and Resources

Istation requires access to computers and is often used as part of a rotation of other afterschool activities, including offline reading instruction. Istation offers program implementers access to directed lessons, bibliographies, online interactive books, a teacher's manual, a user's guide and technical support. Instructional materials are scripted so that they can be delivered by staff without an educational background. The actual program is intended to be used by staff that are not very technologically savvy and downloading the program is not time-intensive.

Istation offers an unlimited site license for \$6,900 dollars per year, which is cost-effective for a site that has over 118 children. Individual site licenses cost \$59 dollars per student per year. Costs are typically paid for through grants, although some afterschool programs connected to school districts can apply for 21st Century Learning Center funding. Other sites have applied for specialized sources of public support, such as grants for English as a Second Language students in California. School districts that use the program have been able to access Title 1 money.

Implications for Scaling in NeighborWorks Sites

While Istation is a digital learning tool, it is meant to be complemented by other sources of reading instruction and access to print books. Genevieve Collins stressed that "despite the fact

²⁸ Istation is in the midst of a study that will measure Istation's contribution to preparing pre-kindergarten students for kindergarten, adding to current research that focuses more on reliability and validity. For past studies, click [here](#).

that digital learning and education is starting to take a very front seat, we still have to pay attention to blended learning,” which includes time with computers, teachers and print books. To promote this goal, Istation assigns a Lexile level (the readability score assigned to public library books) to every student based on his/her assessment results. As result, librarians anywhere in the country can show children books that are appropriate for them to read.

Istation is currently predominantly used by schools and school districts, but it has also been implemented in community-based settings and a small number of housing sites around the country. According to Julian Huerta of Foundation Communities, “It’s easy to use, the kids like it, and there’s lots of data you can get from it. It holds potential as a tool that a number of organizations can adopt and be able to provide [consistent] programming that has some research behind it and evaluation tools which [...] can help those programs know they are making progress.”

This summer, three NeighborWorks members will launch an Istation pilot: Foundation Communities, Community Housing Partners and NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley. The pilot will include a total of about 220 kids at three sites at different-sized properties. An informal evaluation will be conducted to assess student outcomes and implementation challenges and plan for next steps. The pilot will provide an opportunity to garner more data and feedback about Istation’s implementation in housing settings.

Bright Spot Profile: Raising A Reader²⁹

Core Elements

Raising A Reader (RAR) is an early literacy and family engagement program for children ages zero to eight that helps families develop, practice and sustain home literacy routines. The program focuses on developing the literacy habits that children need at home to be successful in school and is often complemented by other direct reading instruction programs or educational offerings.

Each week, children bring home bright red book bags filled with books. Program implementers, which are local agencies that work with families, are trained to communicate early literacy strategies to parents that will help them learn and engage in read-aloud strategies. Finally, families are connected with libraries so they can borrow books and sustain reading routines they have established through the program.

Research Base and Evidence of Success

The RAR core program model is based on research which shows that family engagement directly affects academic achievement. According to Executive Director Gabrielle Miller, “It’s exciting for us to see the folks who are doing the hard science like Jack Shonkoff and others at the Harvard Center for the Developing Child really beginning to focus on the need to intervene with families to affect child outcomes.”³⁰ RAR bases its work with parents on accessible versions of research-based practices designed to support book sharing at home.

²⁹ For more information about Raising A Reader, click [here](#).

³⁰ For more information about the work of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard, click [here](#).

To date, twenty independent evaluations show that RAR has a positive impact, significantly improving family reading behavior, parent-child bonding and kindergarten readiness across diverse culture and language demographics.³¹ The outcomes regularly captured include time spent reading, books in the home and trips to the library. According to Gabrielle Miller, “We have studies that demonstrate that even though our direct intervention is with families, [...] when we have researchers measure the cognitive and academic outcomes of children who have participated in Raising A Reader, we see statistically significant effects.” The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s evidence-based practice group just funded a pilot study for another large-scale, randomized control trial that will focus on work in San Diego.

Resources and Infrastructure

RAR is not typically a stand-alone model, so the cost and implementation details differ across affiliates. The most universal requirement is partnership with a local agency, where RAR trains program implementers to communicate early literacy strategies to parents. There are a number of different program models which can be applied based on existing practice, including models that have been implemented by home visitors and parent ambassadors. RAR works with new affiliates to adapt program elements to their unique context.

RAR costs approximately \$110/child at the onset of the program, which covers training and program development. Ongoing costs per child differ across affiliates and program models, but average around \$35/child. Each week, children take home two to four different books. Resource materials are available to support both program implementers and parents. The length of the program cycle depends on the needs of each individual affiliate, and the program model is intended to be adapted to meet the needs of different partner agencies.

Implications for Scaling at NeighborWorks Sites

While the initial model was developed to be school-based, evaluations have demonstrated that RAR can be implemented with fidelity across a number of different settings and adapted to meet the need of particular communities. To date, program implementation in housing contexts has been limited to affiliate Southwest Human Development, which developed a model designed for a target population of immigrants living in public housing. However, Gabrielle Miller mentioned that the organization has recently received “a tremendous amount of interest from subsidized housing communities.”

RAR looks for affiliates that have data capacity and are committed to implementing the program with attention to quality. According to Gabrielle Miller, “When a local agency that works with families expresses interest in becoming an affiliate, the first thing we do is find out what are the components of their program and how are they getting families engaged. [...]. So the first thing we always do is listen and then figure out how we can add Raising a Reader to what they’re doing so that it becomes embedded in their overall model.” In the NeighborWorks context, housing staff could work directly as program implementers, or housers could partner with other family-serving agencies in the community including local schools and libraries.

³¹ For evaluation results, click [here](#).

Bright Spots Summary

Program	Organizational Home	Focus	Ages	Frequency	Cost/Year
Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Groups	Child Care Resources	Increases caregiver and parent knowledge of how to support children's learning and healthy development.	Many groups focus on children ages zero to five and their parents and caregivers.	Weekly for 90 minutes or more.	Staff (\$7,500 to \$10,000 if new hire). Affiliate, training and material fees vary.
Afterschool Kidzlit	Developmental Studies Center	Increases children's motivation to read and builds literacy skills. Often part of existing afterschool program.	Early reading focuses on K – 3 rd grade. Available for up to 8 th grade.	Typically offered two or three times per week, with each session from 30 to 90 minutes. Read-aloud or independently plus related activities.	Staff \$1,750 for 80 K-3 books and support materials. Free online training or \$2,000/day in person.
Istation Reading	Istation	Develops core early reading skills. Direct instruction and assessment Often part of existing afterschool program.	Early reading focuses on pre-K – 3 rd grade. Available for up to 12 th grade. Has separate program for Spanish-speakers.	Two to three times per week for 20 minutes online, with option for additional direct instruction.	Staff, computers Unlimited site license - \$6900 dollars/year. Individual site license - \$59 dollars/student/year.
Raising A Reader	Raising A Reader	Developing family literacy habits. Not typically a stand-alone program.	Focuses on children zero to eight and their parents.	Site-specific.	~\$110/child at start of program. Average \$35/child ongoing but varies.

Lessons for Scaling

The bright spots profiled are examples of evidence-informed programs that could be implemented at scale across the NeighborWorks network. As independent efforts, they have the potential to improve outcomes for young children, from focusing on school readiness to literacy and language development for young readers. If augmented by deliberate efforts to engage parents and connect with other early learning and literacy opportunities in the community, they could also contribute to fostering the broader culture of learning that Sandra Moore alluded to when talking about housers' ability to make a unique contribution to improving educational outcomes. As Martin Blank of the Institute for Educational Leadership stressed, "It's a matter of not seeing [any one] intervention as a silver bullet but rather [viewing success as requiring] a mix of things."

In this context, the desire to replicate a specific program should not detract from the importance of evaluating the local context, including assessing what early learning and literacy programming is already underway—in and around the property—and determining whether there are opportunities to partner or learn from existing efforts. Interview participants underlined the need to ensure that programs are selected and implemented in a way that is responsive to local context. As Talmira Hill of The Community Builders emphasized, "Sustainability happens when you start with what's there. Start with people connecting to each other and figuring out what they want and need in their space. Then they can assess whether a model is needed [and] whether it could be adapted." In the case of NeighborWorks members, this assessment will likely include not only scanning the external environment but also having an internal conversation about whether there is an organizational commitment to build and sustain required infrastructure—particularly staffing.

The programs profiled do not require staff to have specialized education backgrounds from the onset, but they do assume a commitment on the part of staff to engage in training and ongoing learning efforts. Istation and Kidzlit have a structured program design and "off-the-shelf" set of training and support materials. In contrast, Child Care Resources (creator of Kaleidoscope Play & Learn) and Raising A Reader offer support materials and frameworks but work more intensively with affiliate organizations and networks to customize program approaches and working relationships. Importantly, investments in staff capacity must also take into account the support and supervision needed to help program personnel build trust and relationships with families.

In all cases, NeighborWorks members will need to help the national office think through how to (i) provide oversight and support for staff, (ii) build cross-site systems to ensure consistent and high quality implementation and (iii) measure performance. To do so effectively will require cultivating dedicated, ongoing revenue sources and exploring the potential for both national and local educational partnerships.

Conclusion

The interviews conducted for this project revealed significant appetite and interest on the part of housing providers, education practitioners, funders and policy experts alike to further explore housing's potential as a platform for educational success. NeighborWorks' national network of members and the diverse properties they represent provide an exciting opportunity to experiment with new approaches and accelerate learning about what it takes to make a difference on early learning and literacy outcomes. Focusing on school readiness and grade-level reading provides an avenue to capitalize upon members' access to young families, provide important academic supports that can complement other community and school-based efforts and build a culture of learning that sets children on a positive pathway to educational success.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Housing Interviews

Bridge Housing

- Susan Neufeld, Vice President of Resident Programs and Services

Foundation Communities

- Julian Huerta, Deputy Executive Director

Mercy Housing

- Jennifer Covert, Director of Programs and Evaluation (National)
- Alvin Tuvilla, Mercy Housing, Regional Director of Resident Services (California)
- Erik Kregel, Resident Services Manager (California)

Purpose Built Communities

- Carol Naughton, Senior Vice President

Seattle Housing Authority

- John Forsyth, Community Services Administrator

Tacoma Housing Authority

- Michael Mirra, Executive Director
- Michael Power, Education Program Manager

The Community Builders

- Talmira Hill, Vice President of Community Life
- Aviva Rothman-Shore, Community Life Program Manager

Urban Strategies

- Sandra Moore, President
- Josh Goldman, Project Manager for Education and Learning

Education and Early Childhood Interviews

Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

- Nina Sazer O'Donnell, Consultant

Center for the Study of Social Policy

- Charlyn Harper Brown, Senior Associate
- Amy Fine, Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities
- Judy Langford and Nilofer Ahsan, Strengthening Families Initiative
- Vicky Marchand, Pathways Mapping Initiative

Child Care Resources

- Paula Steinke, Community Engagement Manager
- Lisa Conley, Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Program Coordinator

Children and Families Commission of Orange County (Email Response)

- Alyce Mastrianni, Director of Program Development and Evaluation

Children Services Council of Palm Beach County (Email Response)

- Tanya Palmer, Director of System Performance

Denver Early Childhood Council (Email Response)

- Emily Bustos, Executive Director

Developmental Studies Center

- Megan Green, Manager of After-School Programs

Institute for Educational Leadership

- Martin Blank, President

Istation

- Genevieve Collins, Senior Vice President of Strategic Accounts

Raising a Reader

- Gabrielle Miller, National Executive Director

Zero to Three

- Patty Cole, Director of Government Relations

Funders and Policy Experts

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

- Kollin Min, Senior Program Officer

Department of Housing and Urban Development

- Jessica Rosenberg, Technical Assistance Manager for Choice Neighborhoods

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

- Ianna Kachoris, Program Officer

Low Income Investment Fund

- Nancy Andrews, President and CEO
- Candace Wong, Director of California Child Development Programs

Urban Institute

- Erika Poethig, Institute Fellow and Director of Urban Policy Initiatives
- Susan Popkin, Director of Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development and Senior Fellow in Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center

APPENDIX B: WORKS CITED

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Bright Spots Profiled

[Afterschool KidzLit](#)

[Istation Reading](#)

[Kaleidoscope Play & Learn](#)

[Raising A Reader](#)

Select Online Resources

[Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#)

[Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#)

[Child Trends \(Early Childhood Development\)](#)

[Choice Neighborhoods Program](#)

[Harvard Family Research Project](#)

[Housing Opportunity and Services Together Demonstration](#)

[How Housing Matters Strategy at the John D. and Katherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#)

[Tacoma Housing Authority's Education Project](#)

[United Way Worldwide's Education Strategy](#)