BALTIMORE'S PROMISE

Advancing Academic Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Older Youth, Young Adults, and Families in Baltimore

Executive Summary • 2021

Advancing Academic Literacy and Numeracy Learning
for Older Youth, Young Adults, and Families in Baltimore

Context

In the summer of 2020, Baltimore's Promise released a [set of RFPs](#) *seeking partners to develop research and a national scan on the following scopes of work:*

- **Scope A**: Individual and Family Literacy Support Interventions Before and After Formal Education: Ages 0-5, 18-24

- **Scope B**: Adolescent and Older Youth Remediation Within and Outside of Formal Education: Ages 14-24

The questions and content in the RFP were developed through multiple engagement processes and in consultation with Baltimore City Public Schools and local literacy experts. Over the past five months, the researchers worked together to produce a substantial report and database addressing the questions identified in that RFP.

The first section of this packet is the executive summary from the forthcoming (full) report. We have also included a set of recommendations, surfaced through this process, to consider how we as a city create the conditions, opportunities, and infrastructure for any future demonstration model, and most importantly, for any system of literacy (and literacy opportunities) for young adults to thrive. Finally, based on research and impact data from across the country, the components of effective literacy interventions are presented as benchmark criteria charts for your review.

While the research team did not find one single answer, or "silver bullet," to addressing the issues and root causes of low literacy levels in young adults, they did present us with a helpful and needed framework to begin coming together to decide what is already happening and possible for Baltimore. The section highlighted in red below is where we will focus most of our time when we meet next week, so pay close attention to those sets of criteria.

Over the next few days, we ask that you review the content of this document, **paired with your own professional, lived, and personal expertise** on the issue of literacy and young adults in Baltimore and consider the following questions:

- Where do we already do this work well as a city? Where are our gaps?

- Where should we prioritize our time over the next 6 months, year, two years?

- Based on these recommendations and benchmark criteria, what partners are critical to our work together? Who else needs to be at the table?

- As a leader in Baltimore, what would you need to do to make these city-wide, system-level recommendations possible?

Executive Summary

High levels of academic literacy are required for navigating and negotiating most facets of 21st-century life, including supporting a family, education, health, civic participation, and having the tools to compete in an increasingly global and digitally connected economy. Many older youth and young adult learners in Baltimore are not yet on a path to acquire the academic literacy and numeracy skills required to succeed in postsecondary education and training or advanced employment.

This report presents findings from an exploratory study of practices, strategies, interventions, and/or programs that have been successful in developing the academic literacy skills of two sub-populations: (1) older youth and young adults and (2) young parents and their children. These findings are based on an extensive review of the published literature, interviews with eleven local and four national literacy experts, and two family literacy focus groups.

Published literature, interviews, and focus groups all highlighted the diverse, heterogenous nature of the literacy needs of these populations and the accompanying frameworks for approaches, practices, strategies, interventions, and programs for addressing them. Based on our exploratory study, we make two discrete sets of recommendations for each of the sub-populations: (1) initial system level recommendations, and (2) recommended practices for programs.

Advancing Academic Literacies for Older Youth and Young Adult Learners

We initially **recommend that systems** supporting the academic literacy development of older youth and adult learners in Baltimore focus on:

- **Collaborative strategic planning and visioning** by undertaking (1) an assessment and redesign of curricula for equity and corresponding culturally sustaining practices, (2) a plan to address the vacuum in literacy leadership for those educating older youth and young adults, and (3) a method of individually assessing the strengths and needs of older youth and young adult students and providing explicit instruction/intervention/enrichment in literacy across the scope of literacy continuum (basic, intermediate, and disciplinary literacies).

- **Continuity of services and supports across K-12 and adult systems/programming** by outlining the two sets of state and federal departments, two different pieces of federal policy, and two sets of standards for evaluation of literacy learning outcomes exist. Those working with these populations across contexts need to compare and contrast these driving forces behind programming to identify areas of overlap, gaps in service and expectation, and opportunities for collaboration or strategic partnership.

- **Literacy resource identification, access, and acquisition** by identifying existing literacy resources and programming older youth and young adults in Baltimore and the surrounding area, 2) improving access to literacy resources and programming for older youth, young adults, and families, and 3) acquiring additional resources to meet the existing literacy needs of older youth and young adults.

We also provided four sets of **recommended practices for programs** supporting the academic literacy development of older youth and adult learners in Baltimore including:

- **Primacy of individualized assessment**. Assessment for an older youth and young adult must be a student-centered, formative, and multifaceted process. The learner should provide their own insight into their interests (in literacy and more broadly), their attitudes about literacy, personal insights on their learning trajectory and processes, and self-evaluations of their own learning products. The assessor should select and administer a variety of assessments, across the domains of literacy, to determine existing literacy assets as well as needs for additional instruction/intervention/enrichment.

- **Requirement of targeted, differentiated learning.** Literacy instruction/intervention/enrichment must be differentiated to match the strengths and needs of the individual or groups of learners. Literacy instruction/intervention/enrichment must be explicit, sequential, and intensive in nature as well as drawn from the individual or group's assessment data. Literacy instruction/intervention/enrichment must be strategy focused, multi-strategic, and flexible to promote and support learning transfer. Finally, literacy instruction/intervention/enrichment must be contextualized and authentic.

- **Strategies for increasing motivation, persistence, and retention.** For supporting the academic literacy development for older youth and young adults, the literature, local, and national experts reiterate the need to build authentic and meaningful relationships. Working on basic or intermediate literacy skills as an older learner requires trust in the program, educator, and environment. Intrinsic motivation can be fostered through the self-selection of learning goals along with the topics and texts that are aligned to inquiry-based literacy learning lessons. External incentives, cohort systems, and proactive/intrusive advising/tutoring structures also hold promise.

- **Utility of wrap-around models**. In wrap-around models, educational program advisors or professionals meet with each learner to establish "need-driven" approach to program participation where the learner identifies: their goals, strengths, and needs. Proactive supports and services are provided by the program including academic and health/wellbeing supports. Wrap-around models leverage the community-based health services by making intentional connections and assisting learners with navigating these systems. Four wrap-around support models for older youth and young adults include: (1) programs utilizing career pathways models, (2) community high schools, (3) adult charter schools, and (4) individual case management and coaching models provided by community-based adult education and community college programs.

Advancing Intergenerational Family Literacy

We initially **recommend that systems** supporting intergenerational family literacy development in Baltimore focus on:

- **Collaborative strategic planning and visioning** by collaborating with additional families in Baltimore to explore their family literacy assets and needs for programming. This exploration should include an intentional emphasis on families who have been or are: young parents, newcomers (both immigrants and refugees), justice-involved, experiencing homelessness, and/or those impacted by addiction. Collaborative strategic planning and visioning (between families and government and community-based agencies) is necessary to create shared definitions and operationalizing of a four-component ecosystem for equitable, culturally-sustaining family literacy inclusive of (1) early childhood education programming and services, (2) adult education/workforce development programming and services, (3) parent-child interactivity literacy activity (ILA) programming and services, and (4) parent education/advocacy.

- **Continuity of services and supports across government (health, education, library) and community-based programming** by exploring opportunities to increase alignments and remove redundancy across systems including funding, assessment, curricular structures, and program supports in the four-component model. States innovating their family literacy networks (like Illinois, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina) or aligning their literacy-related service delivery (like Connecticut, Utah, and Colorado) all provide models focused on the continuity of services and supports for further exploration and adaptation in the Baltimore context.

- **Literacy resource identification, access, and acquisition** by (1) identifying existing literacy resources and programming family literacy in Baltimore and the surrounding area, (2) improving access to literacy resources and programming for families, and (3) acquiring additional resources to meet the existing literacy needs of young parents and their children.

We also provided four sets of **recommended practices for programs (or networks of programs)** supporting intergenerational family literacy development in Baltimore including:

- **Primacy of individualized, family-driven assessment**. Family literacy programs and initiatives must begin with acknowledging family's expert role in their child's development and learning. As each family is unique, individual assessment should include the parents' goals for their own and their child's development as well as their needs for support. Family's and community's funds of knowledge should also be intentionally assessed. Assessments should include interdisciplinary, developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate formative educational, language, and literacy and numeracy assessments in child's home language and the family's literacy practices

- **Prerequisite of parent-child interactive literacy activities (ILAs) and parent education/advocacy.** From birth to five, parents and caregivers are the primary adults in a child's life and their best teachers. Any program attempting to incorporate family literacy components should create positive, goal-oriented relationships between families and educators/program staff utilizing the individual data collected from families. Five practices that are critical to young children's literacy development: talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing. Programs should encourage and expand on things families (all members) already do that support their child's language, literacy, and numeracy. Programs should provide explicit instruction and materials (print and digital) on culturally sustaining interactive parent-child literacy activities (ILAs) inclusive of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing.

- **Strategies for increasing motivation, persistence, and retention.** Parents, especially young parents, may feel particularly disenfranchised from educational and health programs due to their own recent experiences, which may make them less motivated to engage with these systems. The literature, experts, and family literacy focus group participants identified several strategies for increasing motivation, persistence, and retention including: (1) a focus on inquiry-based learning, (2) the use of peer mentors/educators, (3) the use of multimodal communication technologies to reinforce language and literacy development concepts/ routines, and (4) the importance of communicating parents' rights and advocacy avenues.

- **Utility of wrap-around models**. Research, national experts, and local literacy experts all identified that parents, caregivers, and guardians of young children can/do experience many barriers to family literacy. In wrap-around models, educational program advisors or professionals meet with each learner to establish family "need-driven" approaches to program participation where the learner identifies: their goals, strengths, and needs. Proactive supports and services are provided by the program including academic and health/ well-being supports. Wrap-around models leverage the community-based health services by making intentional connections and assisting learners with navigating these systems. Several promising national programs that employ wrap-around models for family literacy include: CAP Tulsa, East Side House, Family Futures Downeast, the Jeremiah Program, the Toberman Neighborhood Center, the Village of Promise, and the Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham.

In conclusion, we believe that many older youth, young adults, and young families in Baltimore are acutely in need of further development of and support in their academic literacies. Therefore, we made recommendations based on all three data sources. Yet, we want to emphasize that existing academic literacy needs are not the result of a lack of capacity or individual deficit for these young people. On the contrary, the literature, experts, and focus groups all reiterated and affirmed the literacy talents and complex language skills of Baltimore's older youth and young adults. The current imbalances in academic literacy skill fall squarely on the historically and systemically inequitable institutional systems for families, youth, and young adults in Baltimore.

City-Wide + System-Level Recommendations for Advancing Academic Literacy and Numeracy for Older Youth and Young Adult Learners in Baltimore

I. **Focus on Collaborative (Community and District) Strategic Planning and Visioning for Equitable Academic Literacy Development of Learners. Some essential components for exploration/inclusion:**

    A. Audit the existing curriculum and assessment structures (across disciplines) for equity and culturally sustaining practices and texts. Revise/replace existing protocols with equitable texts and practices aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines.

    B. Provide access to high quality, high interest, multimodal texts and engage/support students (and all community members) in wide-reading, writing, and creating during curricular and non-curricular tasks and activities.

    C. Integrate the teaching and learning of digital literacy skills and safety as a non-negotiable component of all disciplinary literacy instruction along with print-based literacies.

    D. Address lack of literacy instructional knowledge in schools and programs with system/schoolwide inquiry- based professional learning on disciplinary and intermediate literacy for all educational professionals inclusive of administration, faculty, and support staff.

    E. Address lack of literacy leadership by hiring/placing full time literacy and language professionals/ coaches (Reading/Math Specialists/Coaches, ESOL Specialists, and Speech Language Pathologists) in schools and programs to:

        1. Provide extensive/intensive instruction/intervention for students in literacy and language; and
        2. Serve as professional literacy and language resources and advocates for building level instructional teams, families, and community members.

    F. Identify and target the individual needs and assets for students across the scope of literacy continuum (basic, intermediate, and disciplinary literacies) for explicit instruction/intervention/ enrichment in literacy.

    G. Create new instructional schedules that prioritize and provide time for professional development around literacy for educational staff and provide dedicated time to meet students' needs for explicit instruction/intervention/enrichment in literacy.

    H. All of the above + the following (I.-M.) for a focus on intergenerational family literacy:

    I. Collaborate with families in Baltimore to learn more about their family literacy assets and needs for programming with intentional focus on families who have been or are: young parents, newcomers (both immigrants and refugees), justice involved, experiencing homelessness, and/or those impacted by addiction.

    J. Create shared definitions and operationalizing of intergenerational family literacy in Baltimore inclusive of a four-component model:

        1. Early childhood education programming and services;
        2. Adult education/workforce development programming and services;
        3. Parent-child interactive literacy activity (ILA) programming and services; and
        4. Parent education/advocacy programming and services.

    K. Collaborate across government departments (education, health, library) and community programs to create ecosystem of networks focused on four-component model of intergenerational family literacy.

L. Identify all major stakeholders and providers in each component of model.

1. Early Childhood Education – Head Start - Maryland Family Network, Catholic Charities, etc.
2. Adult Education/Workforce Development – BCCC, SBLC, Strong City, Adult Charter School, etc.
3. Parent-Child Interactive Literacy Activities/Parent Education – Library, Home visiting programs like family/nurse partnerships, early intervention, early head start, etc.
4. Parent Education – Home visiting programs like family/nurse partnerships, early intervention, early head start, etc.

M. Create shared definitions and operationalizing of culturally and linguistically appropriate, asset driven family literacy networks in Baltimore.

II. Focus on Continuity of Services and Supports Across K-12 and Adult, Family, and Workforce Education Systems/Programming

A. Explore opportunities to increase alignments and remove redundancy across systems including assessment, curricular structures, and program supports.

B. Create strategic partnerships for learner services (like dual enrollment) across the K-12 system and adult, family, and workforce education providers and agencies (labor, health, library systems) beginning with Career and Technical Education Programming.

C. Create strategic partnerships for professional development on literacy learning for older youth and young adults across the K-12 education system and adult, family, and workforce education providers and agencies (labor, health, library systems).

D. Create strategic partnerships for services and professional development across and between government systems and community-based systems in the four-component two-generation family literacy model beginning with the Pratt Library System.

III. Focus on Literacy Resource Identification, Access, and Acquisition

A. Complete asset mapping of literacy resources and programming in Baltimore and surrounding area.

B. Create interagency or interdepartmental council for literacy charged with creating, coordinating, and evaluating culturally and linguistically appropriate methods for navigating systems of delivery across literacy resources and programming.

C. Investigate the cultural and linguistic resources individual neighborhoods and local social networks use to consume and disseminate information about resources. Use these resources and channels for formal and informal communication on literacy resources and programming.

D. Utilize plain language strategies and tools when communicating about available literacy resources and programming.

E. Mitigate barriers to access literacy resources and programming like transportation, lack of necessary personal or material resources, fee-based literacy services and programming, and lack of trust.

Recommended Benchmark Criteria for Programs + Interventions Supporting Academic Literacy Development for Older Youth and Young Adults

*Recommended Practices	Description in Implementation
1. **Individualized Assessment**	• Begins with intentional building of rapport including assessing learner's interests, insights on their own learning process and progress, attitudes toward literacy, and aspirations for college and/or career. • Includes developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate formative and summative battery of assessments for placement and monitoring progress. • Determines discrete literacy assets and needs across basic, intermediate, and disciplinary skill sets. • Produces results/findings that are explored and discussed with the learner and tied to instructional/intervention or extension recommendations and goal development. • Informs individualized instruction, intervention, or extension and learner's goal evaluation in an iterative manner.
2. **Targeted Differentiated Learning**	• Explicit, sequential, and intensive instruction, intervention, and extension based on ongoing assessment data. • Strategy focused, multi-strategic, and flexible intensive instruction, intervention, and extension that support transfer of learning. • Prioritizes and provides equitable, culturally sustaining practices across instruction, intervention, and extension. • Prioritizes and provides digital literacy learning across instruction, intervention, and extension. • Prioritizes and provides authentic/contextual learning across instruction, intervention, and extension. • Guided and provided by highly qualified literacy and language professionals
3. **Strategies for Increasing Motivation, Persistence, and Retention**	• Build authentic and meaningful relationships where learner's culture and interests are supported and fostered. • Evaluate school, classroom, and program cultures to determine how they support or hinder the literacy learning environment and make appropriate changes. • Utilize learner-centered inquiry or project-based instruction and programming (like service-learning). • Create a community of learners through the use of cohorts and other opportunities for creating belonging and connection among learners who share similar program goals and provide opportunities for small group or peer mentoring Develop and utilize learner advisory boards. • Can include proactive/intrusive advising and tutoring as part of instructional programming. • Provide incentives/rewards for learners who meet individualized learning goals or accomplish learning specific skills. • Provide information/instruction on roles and structures of applicable health and educational systems. • Provide information/instruction on learner's rights across health and educational systems. • Provide opportunities to facilitate learner's exploration, navigation, engagement, and advocacy with/in health and educational providers and systems.

4. Wraparound Service Models	• Utilize program advisors or other educational or mental health professionals (social workers, counselors) to meet and collaborate with each learner to establish need-driven, evidence-based approach to program participation.
	• Encourage/guide learners to identify their own goals, needs, and strengths.
	• Provide proactive supports and services targeted to both fit the learner's needs and the communities cultural preferences.
	• Leverage the community-based health services provided by governments and non-profits by making intentional connections and assisting learners with navigating these systems.
	• Commonly include components of academic supports (like access to academic advising, tutoring, supplemental instruction, and/or English language development).
	• Commonly include components of health/wellbeing supports (like access to mental health counseling, health programming, employment support, childcare, and transportation support).
	• Include programs like Career Pathway Models, Community Schools (high schools), Adult Charter Schools, student support service models in higher education, and individual case management programs in community-based adult education programs like the National External Diploma Program.

* The practices listed can be used across a variety of overall approaches to literacy education and within many different educational structures. This document does not specify one particular program or approach to literacy education. We have highlighted these practices based on our review of research and literature available in December of 2020. There may be other practices worthy of attention but not yet available in the public domain. New literacy research could alter or add to the practices recommended here. For these reasons, choosing to enact these practices would leave agency and choice for individual schools, programs, educators, and administrators.

Additional[1] Recommended Benchmark Criteria for Programs + Interventions Supporting Intergenerational Family Literacy Development

*Recommended Practices	Description in Implementation
1. **Individualized Assessment**	• Begins with acknowledging family's expert role in their child's development and learning. • Asks about and prioritizes the family's' goals for their and their child's development and learning. • Asks for parent/family insights about their child's interests, developmental history, attitudes/behaviors, and needs. • Includes Funds of Knowledge assessment. • Includes interdisciplinary developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate formative educational, language, and literacy assessments in child's home language. • Capable of screening for early language delays in child's home language. • Produces results/findings that are explored and discussed with the family and tied to recommendations and goal development.
2. **Targeted, Culturally Sustaining, and Developmentally Appropriate Parent/ Child Interactive Literacy Activities (ILAs)**	• Create positive, goal-oriented relationships between families and program staff. • Encourage family to communicate with their child in their home language. Incorporate family's culture and language(s) in all programming and activities. • Provide/ensure access to many different, high-quality, culturally sustaining books and writing materials and opportunities to read and write across all settings (community, educational, health, home). • Provide explicit instruction, and materials, on culturally sustaining interactive parent-child literacy activities (ILAs) inclusive of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing. • Encourage and expand on things family (all members) already does that support their child's language, literacy, and numeracy. • Show how family can explore and play with objects, talk, and use gestures during existing everyday routines (print and digital) with child to facilitate literacy and numeracy development. • Consider hybrid (online/face-to-face) models of service delivery (based on community need). • Provide information/instruction on language and literacy developmental milestones and markers in home language and English (where appropriate).

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[1] As the primary focus for the literacy interventions are the young adults (mothers), the focus on intergenerational literacy includes all the recommended practices listed above for young adults as well **as the practices here** to consider an approach for the **entire family**.

3. **Strategies for Increasing Motivation, Persistence, and Retention in (and beyond) Programming**	• Utilize learner-centered inquiry or project-based instruction and programming (like service-learning). • Create peer mentor/educator development programs and utilize peer mentors/educators drawn from the community as educators/co-educators family literacy programming. • Utilize multimodal communication technologies to reinforce language and literacy concepts/routines. • Provide information/instruction on roles and structures of applicable health and educational systems, parent/guardian's rights across systems, and opportunities to facilitate family exploration, navigation, engagement, and advocacy with health and educational providers and systems.	
4. **Wraparound Services Models**	• Utilize program advisors or other educational and/or health professionals (nurses, social workers, counselors) to meet and collaborate with each family to establish need-driven, evidence-based approach to program participation. • Encourage/guide family to identify their own goals, needs, and strengths. • Provide proactive supports and services targeted to both fit the family's needs and the community's cultural preferences. • Co-enroll families across needed educational programing (early childhood education and adult/continuing education). • Leverage the community-based health services provided by governments and non-profits by making intentional connections and assisting learners with navigating these systems. • Commonly include community-need driven components of academic supports (like access to academic advising, tutoring, supplemental instruction, and/or English language development). • Commonly include community-need components of health/wellbeing supports (like access to mental health counseling, health programming, employment support, childcare, and transportation support).	

* The practices listed can be used across a variety of overall approaches to literacy and language education and within many different educational structures. This document does not specify one particular program or approach to literacy/language education. We have highlighted these practices based on our review of research and literature available in December of 2020. There may be other practices worthy of attention but not yet available in the public domain. New literacy research could alter or add to the practices recommended here. For these reasons, choosing to enact these practices would leave agency and choice for individual schools, programs, educators, and administrators.

Baltimore's Promise Action Team Values and Ways of Working

Value	Ways of Working
Centering Community Voice	• Keep students at the center of all discussions, decisions, and planning (and not after the fact...as part of every phase of planning). • We are committed to listening to what the community and our constituents are telling us. • Value the voices of the end user. • How we support youth + young adults to fully participate.
Equity + Anti-Racism	• Keeping youth at the center of the work (voice, leadership, decisions). • Transference of power. • Trust with students. Note: Our work will disrupt the status quo and systemically racist systems. We recognize that to be anti-racist we must reflect on our own internal biases and consistently ask if there are any unintended consequences to the work.
Focus/Intention	• Commitment (to the process, to the people, to the result). • Discernment. • Urgency (think about Hustle + BP definition for this value). • Perseverance.
Creativity	• Flexibility. • Disruption. • Thinking outside of the box + being open to new ideas. • Resourcefulness. Note: Systems are broken and it will require creativity to fix where we are.
Belonging	• Respecting fellow Action Team members and their perspectives. • Being intentional in considering underrepresented populations, such as newcomer youth, English language learners, and youth with disabilities.

Last Update: 1/14/2021

Foundational to all of the work of the Action Teams is this key belief:

LITERACY IS A HUMAN RIGHT.