

THE LITERACY COOPERATIVE 2022 POLICY STRATEGIES

The Literacy Cooperative (TLC) policy agenda seeks to **elevate the voices of our partners, board, and other stakeholders** to bridge gaps in the education continuum and improve access to and delivery of quality literacy and whole family services in Greater Cleveland. TLC works to ensure that policies and practices are informed by research available about the individual and collective benefits that accrue when individuals have access to high-quality literacy education and integrated education and training.

In 2022, we will continue to deploy strategies to improve early literacy education, support a two-generational (2Gen) approach and caregiver engagement in early education, and embed literacy in public employment services.

1. **Early Literacy Education**

Research from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child has found that over 1 million new neural connections are formed every second during the first few years of life, creating the foundation for learning over the child's lifetime. Building on this science, studies have found that investing in early childhood education is one of the most cost-efficient strategies for economic growth. Investments can occur through new programming, expansion of existing programming, and/or increased wages for child development associates.

TLC recommends policymakers continue to:

1. Provide statewide funding for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which mails books to enrolled children every month from birth to five, and highlight the work in Cuyahoga County as an example of a national best practice for expanding or launching efforts to increase access to books beginning at birth.
2. Include additional supports to early childhood education, such as at-home programs that provide families with support to develop their children's academic skills to prepare them for school.
3. Prioritize and fully fund high-quality early childhood education at scale, regardless of setting (e.g., center-based, school-based, etc.) and commit to ongoing support for Step Up to Quality so families can choose from high-quality options and afford to access them.

With this in mind, TLC will deploy the following strategies:

1. Highlight the success of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Cuyahoga County as an example of a national best practice for expanding or launching efforts to increase access to books beginning at birth.
 - a) **State:** The Ohio Governor's Imagination Library gave all children under 5 across Ohio the opportunity to receive new books and begin expanding their horizons from the moment they are born. **TLC will share our outreach and engagement strategies to assist in the expansion of access throughout the state.**
 - b) **Local:** The gap in the number of words and language heard by low-income children and their wealthier peers from birth until age three leads to developmental delays that make achieving literacy a challenge. Cuyahoga County has the fifth largest enrollment in the nation for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. **TLC will work with philanthropies in the Greater Cleveland region**

to seek ways to align strategy and pool funds to build the capacity and resources to ensure all children have access to these and other programs.

2. Access to high-quality early childhood programming is not always available to families in our community. Needed alternatives to this programming include at-home supports that provide the tools to prepare children for school, especially in high poverty areas.
 - a) **Federal:** The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act is part of WIOA. However, program measures for family literacy are not mandated in WIOA and make funding less of a priority. ***TLC will advocate for adult education instruction that includes family literacy focused on the caregivers' role as their children's advocate and first teacher.***
 - b) **State:** Best practices such as SPARK and MomsFirst have proven effective in preparing children to enter kindergarten at grade level. ***TLC will advocate braiding state funds that allow for family engagement and literacy activities that focus on the success of preparing children for school and advancing opportunities for their caregivers.***
 - c) **Local:** Greater Cleveland offers several examples of quality caregiver engagement. Quality is defined as authentic engagement, soliciting input rather than just feedback, and acting upon that input and feedback. ***TLC will continue to work towards better caregiver engagement in the 2Gen Steering Committee and is willing to host listening sessions, share information, or otherwise support efforts to both secure and share input and feedback.***

3. Prioritize and fully fund high-quality early childhood education at scale, regardless of setting (i.e., center-based, school-based, etc.) and commit to ongoing support for Step Up to Quality.
 - a) **Federal:** The Committee for Education Funding has a strong advocacy platform which includes increasing funding in early education. Recognizing the importance of access to quality early education and its impact on a child's future literacy, ***TLC will support our partners to align with the committee's position of increasing the investment in education to five cents for every dollar of the federal budget.***
 - b) **State:** Step Up to Quality was nearly dismantled in the last state budget process and cannot be at risk for the next. TLC and our early education partners will reach out to the study committee to encourage members to meet with providers and consumers to assess the value of the initiative in multiple communities. ***TLC will support our partners' advocacy for funding communities in Greater Cleveland most in need of supplemental support to offer access to high-quality early childhood programming. TLC will continue to provide Step Up to Quality professional development sessions to assist early childhood educators to obtain and maintain credentials.***
 - c) **Local:** A caregiver's income is a significant determinant of their child's early learning experiences and outcomes. The PRE4CLE plan clarifies the partnership with Cuyahoga County government to expand Universal Pre-K to all children. ***TLC will support our partners' advocacy to local elected officials for an increase in the tuition assistance available to families for early childhood programs, especially those with low income.***

2. Support two-generational practices and encourage caregiver engagement in early education

Research shows that development gaps between children who have caregivers with low income and low education levels and their peers who come from more affluent, well-educated families show up as early as three and persist through high school. Research also shows that low-income families spend a larger percentage of their earnings on childcare and preschool, even though the quality of these programs is not as high as those that their wealthier counterparts attend. Organizations such as the Aspen Institute, the United States Chamber of Commerce, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have started turning to two-generation, or whole family strategies.

To continue work in this space, TLC recommends that policymakers:

1. Integrate income and workforce development programs into early childhood programming to include and promote opportunities that unlock the full potential of caregivers, incentivize programs to address the well-being of families, and simultaneously work with children and caregivers together.
2. Invest in a countywide two-generation practice that supports family learning, partners with families as equals, invites children to learn, and allows adults to apply their skills.
3. Promote and incentivize reductions in racial disparities in access to and success in literacy related programming.

With this in mind, TLC will deploy the following strategies:

1. Explore the best ways to engage caregivers and other users of resources in the Ohio Department of Education Whole Child Framework or the Governor's Children's Initiative.
 - a) **State:** Conditions of Covid-19 have made it challenging to engage with stakeholders. ***TLC will reach out to the Ohio Department of Education and offer to host a listening session for them as part of the annual 2Gen Summit.***
 - b) **Local:** Bringing state issues to local audiences is an important role of an intermediary. ***TLC will host a regional meeting in Cuyahoga County with the new Director of Children's Initiatives.*** At this meeting, we will share the importance of whole family approaches to services, and we will include caregiver voices.
2. Invest in programs that build a strong foundation in life for young children, including childcare and two-generation strategies, that support caregivers in both employment and raising children.
 - a) **Federal:** Ascend from the Aspen Institute has explored the effectiveness of two-generation approaches across the country. From this work, they have identified Head Start and Child Care and Development Block Grants as priorities for supporting caregiver engagement and providing funding for childcare. Recognizing the importance of engagement and support in two-generation strategies, the current funding levels for both programs should be maintained. Likewise, the current income threshold guidance for the Child Care and Development Block Grants should be maintained, if not increased. ***TLC will support our partners in advocating for increased funding.***
 - b) **State:** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has granted flexibility and guidance on how to use TANF, Medicaid, and Community Services Block Grants to implement two-generation strategies. Building from successes shown in Utah and Connecticut, the State of Ohio should prioritize and incentivize collaborations among early childhood, human service, and post-secondary entities to support caregivers in fulfilling their responsibilities by helping them balance family and work priorities. ***TLC will share brief profiles of 2Gen strategies in Greater Cleveland that partner with Head Start, Medicaid, TANF, or other federal programs and will distribute them to the General Assembly.***

c) **Local:** Through expansion of Universal Pre-K, County Jobs and Family Services will begin to work with the Office of Early Childhood to develop a two-generation family engagement structure that will integrate childcare clients with workforce efforts. A working committee has already begun this work. As the County implements this strategy, they should consider best practices from other two-generation efforts, like Cincinnati's Intergenerational Success Project or Newport, KY's Brighton Center, a best practice being replicated in Cleveland with CHN Housing Network's Scholar House. ***TLC will work with the 2Gen Steering Committee to advocate for funding and support to expand these practices in Cuyahoga County.***

3. Develop a countywide two-generation practice that builds family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and their caregivers.
 - a) **Local:** 2Gen or whole family efforts continue to grow across Cuyahoga County. In some cases, programs are adding new programming that rounds out their continuum of services and in other cases programs are identifying new partners to do so. With six active whole family programs represented on the Steering Committee, TLC will turn to the importance of measuring their work at a community level. ***TLC will facilitate discussions with evaluators and a data committee to establish a draft dashboard of community-level whole-family indicators.***

3. Embed literacy in training and workforce programs to increase opportunities for anyone engaging in public services related to employment

Some public programs offer or require work/workforce-related programming as a condition for continued support or services. These include CCMEP (Comprehensive Case Management Employment Program), TANF, SNAP, and WIOA programming. There are also regular conversations across the Ohio General Assembly about requiring Medicaid recipients, or any public benefit recipient, to participate in work or workforce programming.

Successful educational outcomes support long-term workforce success, but adult learners are frequently faced with having to make a choice between supporting their families or participating in literacy programming. There are nearly one million Ohioans without a high school diploma or equivalency, and they are often stuck in low-wage jobs with limited opportunities for growth. Workplace literacy programs help to address these gaps and offer an on-ramp to middle-skill jobs. Ohio can increase access to remedial education and high school equivalency training by contextualizing curriculum and offering it as part of industry-specific credential training.

TLC recommends policymakers:

1. Offer technical assistance and incentives for local areas to develop Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs allowable under WIOA to increase the attainment of literacy gains, technical credentials, and employment.
2. Mandate that programs proactively connect post-secondary students to the public benefits they are eligible for and monitor potential impacts of the Benefit Cliff.
3. Build capacity and collaboration between literacy, workforce, and human services providers to increase use of contextualized curriculum in targeted industry sectors, IET, and whole family programming.

With this in mind, TLC will deploy the following strategies:

1. Incent the integration of basic education and workforce programs to increase the employment of individuals with low literacy or educational attainment.

- a) **Federal:** Federal legislation governs primary streams of funding for workforce development and adult literacy programming. Specifically important are reauthorization of WIOA, the Higher Education Act, and passage of additional measures like the Jobs Act which would allow Pell Grants to cover high-quality, short-term training programs, and the Strengthening Research in Adult Education Act that requires data collection and research on successful state and local adult education and literacy activities. ***TLC will support our partners like the Coalition on Adult Basic Education and the Ohio Workforce Coalition as they develop policy recommendations to improve these federal acts and as they advocate and promote these recommendations to Ohio's federal delegation to the US Congress.***
 - b) **Federal:** All workers, and those seeking work, need access to foundational digital skills as well as skills necessary to advance or reskill for a new job. ***TLC will work with the Ohio Workforce Coalition to submit recommendations to Ohio's federal delegation to the US Congress.***
 - c) **State:** Adult education must be integrated into technical training to be covered by WIOA funding. Despite this policy, there continues to be a disconnect between technical training program educators and their adult education colleagues. ***TLC will submit recommendations to the Office of Workforce Development at Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and Ohio Aspire about how they can help local areas to build IETs.***
 - d) **Local:** As state policymakers need to understand how to better support local areas, local areas need to better understand allowable ways to integrate adult education and workforce programming. ***TLC will present to the NEO Workforce Coalition, with Towards Employment, on how providers in Greater Cleveland can integrate adult education and workforce programming under WIOA or other funding streams.***
2. Build the capacity of adult education and higher education partners to implement IET programs.
 - a) **State:** The Ohio Department of Higher Education convenes a Professional Development Network which provides learning opportunities for Aspire instructors. IET programs should be a recurring topic for the network. ***TLC will explore professional development partnerships on IET and other innovative topics.***
 - b) **Local:** Learning networks are one of the most effective ways to spread and build practices. ***TLC will make recommendations to Ohio's Aspire leadership to create a network of IET program practitioners to share best practices and identify ways to partner.***
 3. Provide contextualized curriculum in targeted industry sectors or occupations for which there is a local employer demand.
 - a) **State:** TLC has facilitated the development of contextualized curriculum in manufacturing, construction, IT, hospitality, and healthcare. ***TLC will partner with the Ohio Workforce Coalition to begin an online catalog of contextualized programs and invite others to add to it.***
 - b) **State:** The Adult Diploma continues to grow in Ohio as an alternative option for adults to secure a high school equivalency at the same time they earn an industry-specific credential. ***TLC will promote the adult diploma program to Ohio Workforce Coalition members, elected officials, and other stakeholders to encourage more adults with specific career interests to use this option for better access to economic mobility.***
 - c) **Local:** The Cuyahoga County Workforce Funders Group created an Action Plan to develop a coordinated, well-functioning workforce system for the County. The three industry sectors in Cuyahoga County that are fundamental to the region's economic development strategy are manufacturing, healthcare, and IT. ***TLC will participate on the sector partnership committees to ensure awareness of and access to the contextualized curriculum and to encourage its use to***

develop the skills of the new and incumbent workers. TLC will also work with the partnership committees to locate and secure funding that can address literacy needs of adults.

Endnotes:

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