Dear Literacy Partners and Friends of the CLA,

2020 was a year of best-laid plans, and quickly-made pivots. At the outset, we introduced our 2020-2022 strategic plan, which launches forward from the starting blocks of community and partnership we’ve forged over the last ten years to realize even more fully the promise of the CLA in the years to come.

We set three strategic priorities: Capacity Building, Alignment, and Advocacy. Each reflects the distinctive ways the CLA aims to augment the work of our members. Transforming an individual’s prospects through literacy takes close, personal attention; transforming a community’s prospects takes an alliance.

When the pandemic hit, our efforts across these strategies accelerated. We increased engagement in professional learning, and we deployed our Impact team toward measuring progress and increasing coordination among members. A key step was our first-ever member-wide survey of program engagement across Chicago Public Schools.

Moving into 2021, our Equity Through Literacy Framework will guide our efforts to address the opportunity gaps facing Chicago’s communities and promote an equity-focused recovery. We know the need will be greater on the other side of COVID.

Our vision of a 100% literate Chicago involves increasing access to literacy, promoting engagement in it, and ultimately cultivating a broad “civic fluency” for all Chicagoans. It’s a vision where everyone is empowered to use the tools of literacy to navigate life, work, arts, and civic engagement effectively and equitably.

We are grateful that you’ve joined us in pursuit of this vision. I know that we can cover the distance together. Indeed, we can’t do it any other way.

With gratitude and all best wishes,

Ken Bigger
Executive Director

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We are - and always have been - a community-propelled organization. From our capacity building programs, to our online networking platforms, to the Literacenter itself, everything we do is designed to create community and collaboration for our members: Chicago's literacy and education nonprofits.

FY20 saw us reach several milestones on the way to our goal of a 100% literate Chicago, including:

- Upgraded our meeting capabilities with new solutions for virtual meetings
- Unveiled a new strategic plan to renew focus on the historical CLA objective of capacity-building for member organizations, while solidifying new ones as we continue to grow in alignment and advocacy
- Launching new brand initiatives, including a design and website overhaul and a branded-merchandise store through Threadless, to build awareness and coalition through designed CLA materials
- Created new avenues of outbound, inbound, and member engagement, including the Lit List COVID-19 resource page, volunteer page, member working groups, and more
- Expanding storage at the Literacenter as a member benefit

As FY20 drew to a close in June, 2020’s COVID-19 crisis and civil movement made us stop and take a step back to revisit how we could truly serve the member organizations and communities that we work with, which set the CLA on a trajectory of comprehensive evolution. This is our pivot.

The COVID-19 crisis puts these groups in a precarious position, and these literacy gaps threaten to become even more pronounced over time - especially for vulnerable communities of color, which suffer a disproportionate impact.

We know that achievement gaps stem from - and are reinforced by - a larger opportunity gap. We’re working on designing solutions that increase equitable access to resources, creating pathways to greater civic fluency and engagement. FY20 has been a year of change - and along with our Alliance, we’re finding opportunities and new ways to move towards a 100% literate Chicago.
The Chicago Literacy Alliance was launched in 2012, after a group of literacy organizations met to compare notes about common challenges. In the course of their conversation, they discovered that they were all working in the same elementary school, without any knowledge of each other’s presence. Seeing this overconcentration of resources alerted these organizations - the first members of the Alliance - to the need for coordinated efforts, and more, it raised awareness that their overconcentration in one place likely meant meaningful gaps and shortfalls in others.

From the beginning, the CLA’s goal was to address these challenges, and empower literacy efforts in ways no direct-service agency could do on its own. Our 2017-2019 strategic plan focused on building engagement in our network and promoting the efficiency and effectiveness of member organizations, laying the foundation for our work in 2020 and beyond. The three strategic actions we use to support the Alliance are capacity building, alignment, and advocacy and thinking strategically about the future, the CLA is poised to significantly expand the areas of alignment and advocacy.

In FY20, one of the steps towards these goals was to create the CLA’s Impact team, which focuses on building the alignment and advocacy pieces of our work. To guide this, we created a new strategic plan covering 2020-2022, focusing on all three pillars with alignment and advocacy ultimately improving the ways in which we support the Alliance and increase the impact of literacy efforts across Chicago communities.

"We’re really grappling with the overarching questions of impact, progress, and equity," says Annie Rezac, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the CLA. "What’s the role we play in that? How do we, as an 'umbrella network', move the needle on literacy, and create visibility and new models for creating real systemic change?"

What does this mean? In short, strategic alignment of services and informed advocacy for resources represent a deeper level of engagement for the Alliance. Where capacity building is essential for removing many of the barriers Alliance members face in their work, alignment and advocacy create coordination and cohesion, ultimately driving our network toward a shared vision of a 100% literate Chicago. Through diving deep into community engagement and data-driven research, our goal is to help our Alliance increase impact in ways tailored to meet community need.
CREATING IMPACT THROUGH ALIGNMENT

Collaboration is key to everything we do at the Chicago Literacy Alliance. The CLA was founded on the idea that creating alignment for the many literacy organizations working in Chicago would lead to greater impact in pushing literacy forward. To that end, we work hard to create an Alliance culture of community, resource-sharing, and yes - collaboration - that brings organizations together in unexpected ways.

One of our favorite FY20 collaborations took place between Alliance members Chicago Dramatists and Literacy Chicago, two organizations that demonstrate just how much common ground can exist between two seemingly unrelated organizations. Chicago Dramatists is an inclusive playwright development organization, working to nurture dramatic writers at every level. Literacy Chicago provides educational programs and services to adults living with low literacy.

Together, they came together to create a groundbreaking new program that aims to improve student literacy through the art and practice of acting and performance. The program, headed by Chicago Dramatists’ Resident Playwright Alum Marsha Estell, culminated in a performance featuring a script derived from the students' lived experiences, closely mirroring their own lives.

The result, measured in reading ability increase, is incredible.

"Every single student improved over the course of the class," says Ean Miles Kessler, Education Outreach Director at Chicago Dramatists. "Half of the students advanced an entire grade level."

The program, an example of the unexpected, groundbreaking work that comes about when organizations find creative ways to collaborate, was not only highly effective - but also fun for the students.

"It was exciting coming here every day to read," says Larita, one of the students. "I was excited about coming to the class because I liked it. And it taught me a lot."

As for the future of the program?

"We look forward to continuing our partnership with Literacy Chicago to grow and foster this program," says Kessler. "We firmly believe this partnership has created a unique way to teach literacy."
**FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS**

**Revenue & Support**

- **Grants & Contributions**
  - Foundations: $127,500
  - Individual & Board: $1,711,127
  - In-Kind Support: $3,505
  - Special Events: $66,651
  - **Total Grants + Contributions**: $1,908,783

- **Earned Income**
  - Dues: $182,226
  - Rental & Reimbursement: $426,531
  - Gain On Sale of Parking Rights: $325,325
  - Other Income: $1,265

- **Total Revenue & Support**: $2,844,130

**Expenses**

- **Program Services**: $2,024,249
- **Administrative & General**: $475,943
- **Fundraising & Development**: $252,863

- **Total Expenses**: $2,753,055

**Net Assets (Deficit)**

- Beginning of Year - As Restated: ($712,050)
- End of Year: ($620,975)

**Revenue & Support**

- Grants & Contributions: 67.11%
- Earned Income: 32.89%

**Expenses**

- Program Services: 73.53%
- Administrative & General: 17.29%
- Fundraising & Development: 9.18%
Our mission is to improve literacy in Chicago by driving collaboration and increasing the impact of our community’s literacy organizations.

We envision a 100% literate Chicago, where the transformative power of literacy is accessible to all.