Directing services to the greatest need, for the greatest impact:

An introduction to the Literacy Equity Initiative™
LITERACY EQUITY INITIATIVE

The Literacy Equity Initiative (LEI) is a robust, data-driven effort led by the Chicago Literacy Alliance (CLA). The CLA collaborates with Chicago neighborhood community leaders to direct literacy services for the greatest impact. The LEI employs a consciously anti-racist lens, building in an asset-based, community-informed approach to advancing literacy, civic fluency, and personal agency for all learners.

WHY

There are many children and adults living with low literacy in Chicago. In Chicago Public Schools, 38% of students in second through eighth grades scored below the national average on the NWEA reading test (Chicago Public Schools, 2019). Beyond childhood, 25% of adults in Cook County live with low literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Furthermore, learning losses become exacerbated by major social dislocations and crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, and the achievement gaps they create become more pronounced over time. Before COVID-19, an estimated 13% of Black teens were often unable to complete their homework because they lacked digital access, compared to 4% of White teens and 6% of Hispanic teens (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). Now, 59% of lower income parents report that their children will likely face one or more obstacles when it comes to remote schooling, such as having to do schoolwork on a cellphone, or having to use public Wi-Fi to finish their schoolwork because there is not a reliable internet connection at home (Vogels, 2020). Therefore, the pandemic’s costs on educational futures will fall disproportionately on lower income households and communities of color.

In order to effectively address the distinct challenges of Chicago's communities, we must design solutions that increase equitable access to resources and create pathways to greater civic fluency, personal agency, and progress. Alliance members have already responded aggressively to the current moment, adapting their interventions to distance learning and alternative venues. The LEI will further mobilize the Alliance, vulnerable communities, and strategic partners to tackle the achievement gaps (which stem from and are reinforced by a larger opportunity gap) exacerbated by the pandemic.

WHAT

LEI: Insights, powered by Innovare, is an interactive dashboard that maps literacy access and assets at the community level including CLA member distribution. LEI: Insights identifies Chicago neighborhoods with the greatest need for support in literacy building and equitable educational opportunities. Currently, LEI: Insights is exclusive to CLA members.

LEI: Confabs are a series of virtual discussions focused on creating deeper understanding and opportunities for authentic connection between Alliance members and communities facing barriers to literacy resources. After each Confab, community members and select Alliance members are invited to participate in an action group to identify and implement collaborative partnerships that address community-identified needs.

LEI: Action is a new model for community literacy investment that utilizes a human centered design approach to research and relationship building. The three components of LEI: Action are:

- facilitating connections among local leaders committed to the advancement of literacy, Alliance members, and external partners;
- engaging in research around specific communities’ learning priorities and barriers from their own perspective; and
- employing collective impact principles to co-design specific strategies that increase literacy.
**WHERE**

Based on initial data from the LEI: Insights dashboard and potential for collaborative partnerships, the CLA has identified and invited six Chicago communities to participate in the Literacy Equity Initiative, including (on map at right) Englewood (1), Washington Park (2), Riverdale (3), Gage Park (4), New City (Canaryville/Back of the Yards) (5), and South Lawndale (6). All six community areas will have a focused Confab and follow-up action group, while Englewood and New City will be the focus of LEI: Action to test the model for deep community engagement around literacy.

**HOW**

Through research and thought leadership, the CLA developed the Equity Through Literacy Framework (ETLF), a research-based, equity-focused theory of change, connecting greater literacy to positive social outcomes. This framework demonstrates literacy’s connection to access, equity, engagement, civic fluency, and ultimately community progress.

The attached framework informs the design process of the LEI, and demands a new way of working with communities that reduces racialized harm, builds necessary infrastructure for sustainable community development, and forges a shared understanding of success. As such, the CLA commits to this process in the pursuit of improving communities and advancing a more equitable future for Chicago.

The outcome areas of the ETLF are:

**ACCESS**

**ENGAGEMENT**

**AGENCY**

**PROGRESS**

**QUESTIONS?**

Please contact Annie Rezac, CLA Director of Strategic Initiatives, at ARezac@ChicagoLiteracyAlliance.org.

**REFERENCES**


