OUR VISION: A 100% LITERATE CHICAGO
the systemic challenges and structural barriers to opportunity facing learners in Chicago’s disinvested communities. Through the LEI, we advance a coordinated, consistent way of talking about the challenges we’re taking on, and expand support for our shared work. We increase our capacity to show just how essential literacy is to forging a long-lasting, resilient, and equity-focused recovery.

COVID is not the only story of the past year. It also showed us with added urgency the essential task of building equity and anti-racism into the work we do and how we do it. At its root, literacy is about far more than any particular technology of information transfer. It is about equity and access - supporting the tools and civic fluency for everyone to participate in life on fair terms of justice and inclusion, reflecting the broad diversity of cultures and identities that make up our communal fabric.

Our mission is to grow literacy in Chicago by driving collaboration and increasing the impact of our community’s literacy organizations. In other words, we’re not a coworking organization that happens to have a literacy flavor. We are a literacy organization that utilizes the planned and accidental magic of collaborative spaces (real and virtual) to drive greater literacy. How we do that will continue to evolve and take new shapes. We will continue to develop that magic, balancing as always sustainability and innovation, to serve in ways that are most effective to advancing our mission, and we can now do so with greater agility and deeper community engagement.

This last year has taught us that we can’t count on things staying the same. As we go forward, we will continue to innovate to add value to our members’ work and to the quality of life for our community. Thank you for being with us now, and for all your contributions to our community and the Chicago community as a whole.

With all best wishes,

[Signature]

Ken Bigger
Executive Director
From the time the Chicago Literacy Alliance was founded in 2012, our focus has been to support Chicago’s literacy and education organizations through capacity building, alignment, and advocacy. In FY21, we built on our foundational strategies, and significantly expanded our efforts around alignment and advocacy. While capacity building empowers our members and forges bonds of trust and collaboration in the literacy sector, alignment and advocacy create coordination and cohesion for increased, community-wide impact.

We believe literacy is a tool for liberation, and to wield the power of literacy, it must be equitably accessible to all. Understanding that, the CLA is committed to building deep community relationships, utilizing data-driven research, and forging new models for systemic change to ultimately reach our shared vision of a 100% literate Chicago.

That is why we created the Equity Through Literacy Framework (ETLF), a research-based, equity-focused theory of change that connects greater literacy to positive social outcomes. This framework demonstrates literacy’s connection to access, equity, engagement, civic fluency, and ultimately community progress.

Through a network of more than 100 organizations, our Alliance addresses the Essential Conditions that need to be in place for learning to occur, which include access to diverse resources, highly prepared educators, holistic early childhood development experiences, safe learning spaces, and scientifically-backed teaching practices.

In FY21, the ETLF set the stage for new strategic initiatives. It became our driving force as we thought about new approaches to our work -- from programming and events, to resources and tools, to community engagement and relationship building. This jump started a new phase of our work. It changed the way we deliver our programs and services. It changed the way we interact with our member community. It changed the way we look at literacy.

Read on to learn more about our efforts this past fiscal year.
WHERE LITERACY & SOCIAL PROGRESS INTERSECT:

How do the tools of literacy empower us to engage in and contribute to our community, political life, and democracy? How does that change during a global health and economic crisis, and at a time of deep civil unrest?

In October 2020, the CLA found itself tackling these questions and more head on through DECODE, a thought-leadership summit to explore the challenges and solutions to increasing literacy in Chicago. As a radical evolution of the CLA’s previous annual conference, the State of Literacy Symposium, DECODE was designed from the ground up to be a contemporary, relevant, first-of-its-kind experience for educators, literacy professionals, engaged philanthropists, civic decision-makers, and members of Chicago’s communities.

Rooted in the Equity Through Literacy Framework, DECODE brought together some of Chicago’s most notable voices in literacy, education, and policy to explore and discuss how literacy is a cornerstone for civic fluency. The full program featured three panel discussions - Tomorrow’s Citizens, Living a Civic Life, and the Impact of Chicago’s Literacy Sector - along with a Q&A and moderated breakout sessions for attendees.

DECODE, along with everything the CLA does, is carefully built with community and connection in mind. One of the biggest benefits for attendees was the opportunity to network with speakers, with fellow attendees, and with the Alliance’s community of member organizations.

"I am so glad I participated in this conference," shared Nora Blakely, President of Brooks Permissions. "I saw familiar faces in different lights and learned about new people and organizations."

DECODE took place in October 2020, but the topics - and the conversations - remain relevant today. DECODE 2020 lives on as a free, publicly accessible resource, with all videos and resources available, on the Chicago Literacy Alliance website.

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RESOURCES:

Full Program

See all of DECODE, free and publicly-available, on our website at the link above!

Welcome Videos

Enjoy video statements on literacy from former Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera, Alderwoman Maria Hadden, Dr. Bettina Love, and U.S. Senator Dick Durbin.
LAUNCHING THE LITERACY EQUITY INITIATIVE:

As we moved into summer of 2020, we saw firsthand how the pandemic began devastating education and programming for the communities the Alliance serves. We knew we needed to turn our new-found theory into action and the CLA team got to work. The CLA worked in collaboration with member organizations, community members, and external experts to design the Literacy Equity Initiative (LEI).

The LEI is a robust, data-driven effort led by the CLA to build collaboration with Chicago neighborhood community leaders, to direct literacy services for the greatest impact. To further mobilize the Alliance, the LEI employs a consciously anti-racist lens, building an asset-based, community informed approach to advancing literacy, civic fluency, and personal agency for all learners.

"The LEI's focus on human-centered design as a foundational approach lets the voice of the community play a critical role in determining the types of support provided," says Andrew Ladd, Partner at Upstream Thinking and a member of the design cohort, "increasing the chances of adoption, efficacy, and transformational impact."

The LEI consists of three main components: Insights, Confabs, and Action.

"The LEI’s focus on human-centered design...lets the voice of the community play a critical role in determining the types of support needed, increasing the chances of adoption, efficacy, and transformational impact."

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.

Rita Kahn, Executive Director of Chicago HOPES for Kids, on LEI: Insights: "I am excited about the high quality and current information that the index will provide as we look to expand program offerings to communities most in need of services. [LEI Insights] will also increase our knowledge of existing organizations and programs in neighborhoods we serve, so we better know who to talk to about partnership and collaboration opportunities."

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LEI: Confabs is 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 - Building off LEI: Confabs, LEI: Action is a new model for community literacy investment that takes a Human Centered Design approach to research and relationship building. The three central 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.

Dr. Lolita Cleveland, Resource Coordinator at Youth Guidance, works in three Riverdale CPS schools and was involved in the LEI Confab and follow-up action group.

“I am excited about the LEI, as it affords low-income-needs communities with the opportunity to have literacy which aids students and parents with the support that is needed to ensure that all students can read,” she shared. “The LEI allows for organizations to collaborate and connect with a holistic approach to literacy in communities, homes and schools.”

“[The LEI] affords low-income-needs communities with the opportunity to have literacy which aids students and parents with the support that is needed to ensure that all students can read.”

In FY21, we hosted Confabs focusing on Englewood, Washington Park, and Riverdale. These three communities were identified using the Literacy Access Score that the CLA developed, which compares access to literacy resources across Chicago’s 77 Community Areas.

After each Confab, the CLA hosted an action group to bring together multiple community stakeholders with CLA members to facilitate action planning around collaborations to address the community’s stated needs. Action Groups have already resulted in impactful collaboration: Neighbor to Neighbor Literacy Project participated in Englewood Unity Day as a result of our Englewood Action Group and installed a little free library in their community garden.

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RESOURCES:

About the Literacy Equity Initiative
Learn more about the LEI’s components and how they work for the CLA’s members.

LEI: Insights, Powered by Innovare
Find out more about this powerful new dashboard!
MEMBERSHIP OVERVIEW:

While our 100 member organizations range across organization type, size, and population served, they all contribute to the literacy landscape in Chicago whether it’s by increasing access to essential conditions for learning, increasing engagement through foundational and advanced literacy applications, or increasing the agency and civic fluency of individuals so they can better navigate the world. To be a member of the Chicago Literacy Alliance, an organization must have a Chicago footprint, a connection to literacy, and a desire to contribute to the Alliance. Beyond that, members can use the Equity through Literacy Framework to map out where they fit into the literacy ecosystem and how they contribute to our shared mission of creating a more literate Chicago.

This membership year began mid-pandemic, dramatically shifting our offerings. Focus was placed on a robust slate of virtual programs and convenings. We conducted weekly social hours and town-hall-style membership meetings weekly. Ken Bigger, the CLA’s Executive Director, connected with member organizations through monthly Executive Leadership Circle calls. We learned about Chicago neighborhoods from community stakeholders in Community Confabs, and strategized with them around how to best meet their needs in Action Groups. A virtual year meant self-reflection and a renewed commitment to upskilling ourselves and our network through anti-racism and DEI training. It also meant a return to our founding moment and the goal to equip the Alliance with a tool to help us better coordinate literacy services - LEI: Insights.

Our shared workspace, the Literacenter, reopened to members with dedicated offices shortly after the start of the year. Over the next 12 months, we altered our space policies gradually to continuously offer access to the space and its amenities to as many members as possible, while prioritizing the safety of all involved. By the end of the year, we returned to offering affordable dedicated offices, reservable meeting rooms, coworking spaces, and other amenities to members.

We welcomed thirteen new member organizations this year:

From top, left to right:
FY21 was a big year for fundraising at the CLA. While in-person events have always been a great way to make connections, offering events on a virtual platform gave us opportunities to connect with supporters that otherwise might not have had chances to attend our live events. This resulted in a $62K increase in revenue in FY21 versus the previous year.

This past fiscal year, the CLA welcomed four new foundation partners and 11 new corporate partners. We thank these foundations, corporations, and their employees for their commitment to our mission of advancing literacy throughout Chicago.

The Literassociates, the CLA’s associate board, hosted several new and virtual events including: Reading Between the Wines, Poker Night, Trivia Night, and more. We also garnered 280 new supporters who connected with us nationwide from over 30 states. We are excited and energized to have advocates dedicated to our mission spreading the word across the country.

One for the Books, the CLA’s annual signature fundraising event, was the most successful to date. We thank all of our sponsors, partners, and supporters for celebrating literacy with us and making the event such a rewarding experience.

Thank you to all our members, community partners, and donors for supporting us in this work. We are extremely grateful for commitment and partnership. Your support moves us closer to our vision of a 100% literate Chicago.
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BOARDS:

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Kaitlyn Childs, Network and Evaluation Specialist
Damika Hayden, Director of Finance
Usman Khan, Marketing Manager
Julie Lanham, Assistant Director of Development
Jimmy Martin, Managing Director
Erin McCann, Community Director
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Amanda Porta, Director of Development
Stacy Ratner, Co-Founder
Annie Rezac, Director of Strategic Initiatives
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FINANCIALS:

Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2021

Revenue and Support

Grants & Contributions
- Foundations: 132,315
- Individual & Corporations: 1,755,649
- In-Kind Support: 3,218
- Special Events: 64,934
- Net Assets Released from Restrictions: 0
- Total Grants & Contributions: 1,956,116

Earned Income
- Dues: 123,850
- Rental & Reimbursement: 394,010
- Other Income: 167,247
- Total Earned Income: 1,803,914

Total Revenue & Support: 2,641,223

Expenses

- Program Services: 1,803,914
- Administrative & General: 460,700
- Fundraising & Development: 254,341
- Total Expenses: 2,518,955

Net Assets (Deficit)

- Beginning of Year: (620,975)
- End of Year: (498,707)

Revenue & Support

Grants & Contributions: 74%
Earned Income: 26%

Expenses

Program Services: 72%
Administrative & General: 18%
Fundraising & Development: 10%
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.