

Community Catalyst

JOURNEY MAP



The Read Aloud Lincoln team's first year has been one of unlocking the immense potential for collaboration, energy, and impact that existed in their community, asking the right kinds of questions, and being thoughtful about supporting and enhancing what others are already doing.



Read Aloud Lincoln

Lincoln Community Foundation

Lincoln, NE

FEBRUARY 2019

Read Aloud Lincoln (RAL) was born in 2017 after the city of Lincoln, through Prosper Lincoln, determined one of the three most critical areas to address as a city is Early Childhood Development. This came in part after an eye-opening census result in 2010 reporting that the high degree of poverty experienced by Lincoln's children, with the number of extreme poverty census tracts jumping from zero to six since 2000. The project is aligned with the national Read Aloud 15 initiative, which focuses on the importance of reading aloud to children from birth to age 8 for 15 minutes each day to prepare them for kindergarten.

The journey of the Read Aloud Lincoln team's first year has been one of unlocking the immense potential for collaboration, energy, and impact that existed in their community, waiting to be tapped by those willing to build and nurture relationships, asking the right kinds of questions, and being thoughtful about supporting and enhancing what others are already doing.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES, ADJUSTMENTS & IMPACT

To launch locally, the Lincoln Community Foundation intentionally engaged key partners: organizations who offer places families go for children to have experiential opportunities in creativity, reading and play: Lincoln City Libraries, Lincoln Children's Museum, History Nebraska Museum, Midwestern African Museum of Art, and University of Nebraska State Museum. These partners all had pre-existing relationships with one another but had never collaborated in any substantial way. This initial group offered advice on how the libraries and museums could partner to promote reading aloud to young children and their families in Lincoln. RAL was conceived and launched as a city-wide initiative with special interest in the South of Downtown (SOD) Neighborhood, which the Prosper Lincoln report identified as a key area.



To launch locally, the Lincoln Community Foundation intentionally engaged key partners: organizations who offer places families go for children to have experiential opportunities in creativity, reading and play: Lincoln City Libraries, Lincoln Children’s Museum, History Nebraska Museum, Midwestern African Museum of Art, and University of Nebraska State Museum. These partners all had pre-existing relationships with one another but had never collaborated in any substantial way. This initial group offered advice on how the libraries and museums could partner to promote reading aloud to young children and their families in Lincoln. RAL was conceived and launched as a city-wide initiative with special interest in the South of Downtown (SOD) Neighborhood, which the Prosper Lincoln report identified as a key area.

From the launch of the project, the RAL team experienced the value of partnership. During meetings, one comment would feed off another, and by the end of the second meeting, we already had events organized! More importantly, we were thrilled at the partners’ willingness to take an idea and make it their own.

We learned more about an asset-based approach to community engagement at the February ABCD/IMLS conference in Chicago. The concepts were familiar, but the terminology of ABCD began making our thinking, as well as our questions, clearer. **We began thinking more about the assets. We knew what was needed, or what we thought we knew was needed, but we were not asking enough questions of the residents to define what all the assets are in Lincoln.** We realized that we first needed to learn more about the community of South of Downtown within the community of Lincoln.

Returning from Chicago, our team began intentionally holding learning conversations in the community, starting with any group or organization that touched the lives of children under the age of 5. We met with schools, daycares, community groups, community centers, libraries-- anyone we could find and who would say yes to meeting with us. We held the conversations with the goal not just to “sell” the Read Aloud Lincoln program, but with the intention to build the relationship, to learn about their activities, priorities, and assets, and through this, reveal opportunities for collaboration.

As we held our conversations, we were greatly surprised by the number of groups, organizations and networks who care about early childhood learning. We also realized there have been coordinated networks for early childhood learning for a long time that we hadn’t necessarily known about, and who now are becoming our partners. Every time we held a Learning Conversation, we would get a new name or a new connection of a group who has the same focus. **We realized that we could become a connection point for many of those groups** so that, by the time we’re finished with this work in terms of the timeframe of this grant, we could play a role in all of those entities working together, not only to promote reading aloud, but for everything related to early childhood development.

These conversations also sparked tremendous energy around collaboration and ways to leverage mutual resources, along with delight and surprise of discovering a shared passion with many different groups for this issue. Soon, groups were calling us and asking us to come speak, have a table at their event, or join an early learning committee, including the Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs. These would lead to more connections that then allowed us to connect with new groups, such as invitations to have tables at the annual Juneteenth celebration as well as Cooper Park community festivities. This opened the way for us to connect with a community with which we had no prior relationships.

As the project progressed, our core team also experimented with and developed more authentic ways of engaging our steering committee members. Rather than one-way communication and decision-making, meetings began to be geared toward shared decision-making and leadership. This made a profound difference in the quality of the partnerships, creative solutions emerging, and the overall energy, expansion, and impact of the project. It led us to focus on our work as a systems change rather than a program implementation.

One challenge that arose as in so many new relationships and opportunities to collaborate was the need to stay focused and realize when to say “no” to some opportunities. When we found ourselves becoming scattered or overwhelmed, it was helpful to continually revisit the commitment to focus primarily on the South of Downtown Neighborhood while also making time to remain connected and engaged on a larger city level.



.....
“As we held our conversations, we were greatly surprised by the number of groups, organizations and networks who care about early childhood learning.”

"Read Aloud Lincoln"

JOURNEY MAP



Eye-opening census result in 2010 reported the high degree of poverty experienced by Lincoln's children.

Prosper Lincoln determines that one of the three most critical areas to address as a city is Early Childhood Development

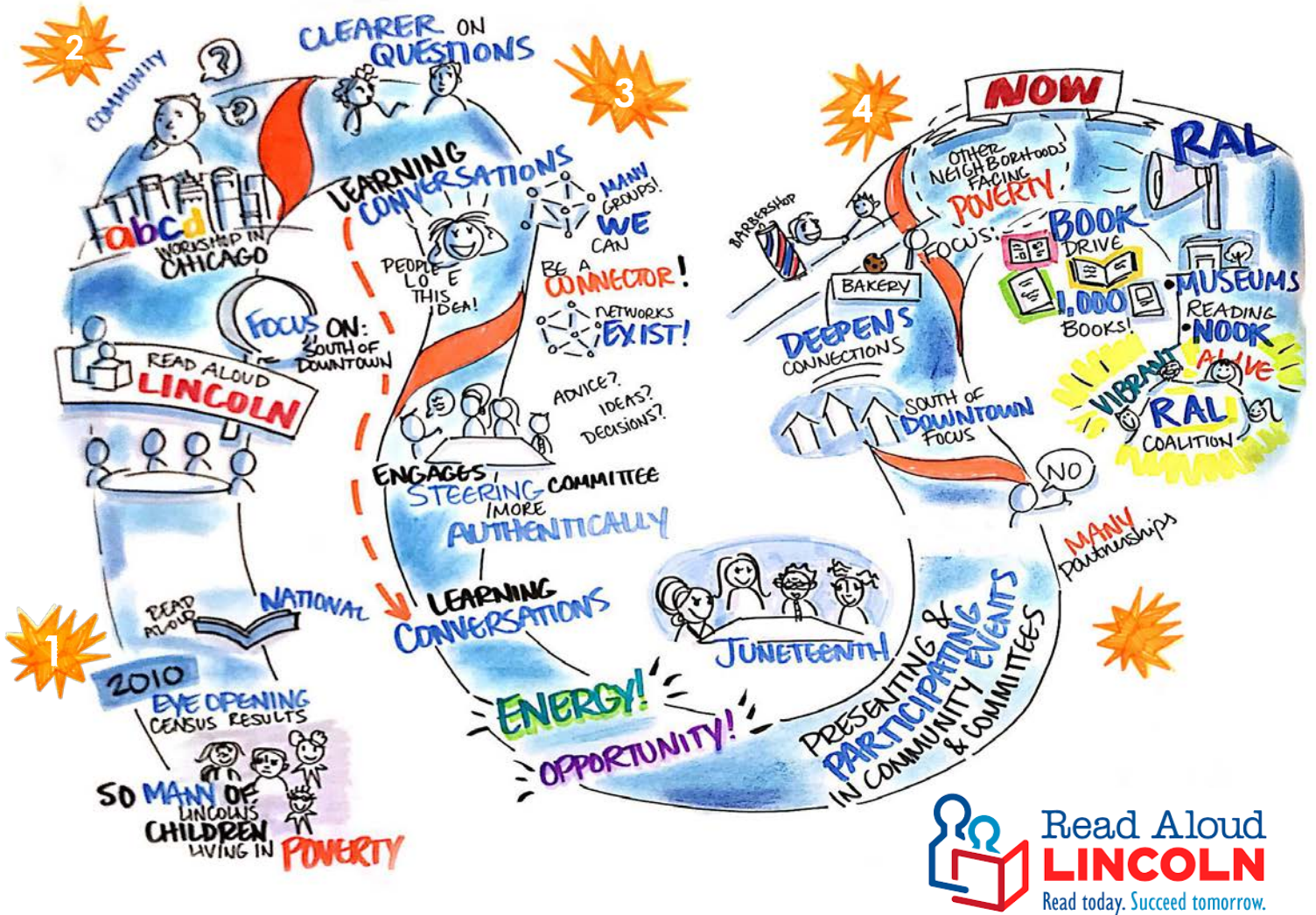


Where in the journey has the team engaged with the community and/or taken action with/alongside the community?

How did their work, approaches, and relationships change?



How did their assumptions or perspectives of their communities shift based on what they learned from ABCD and through working on their projects?



"As we began the work, "we began thinking more about the assets." We knew what was needed, or what we thought we knew was needed, but "we were not asking enough questions of the residents" to define what all the assets were



Returning from Chicago ABCD workshop, the team begins intentionally holding learning conversations with existing partners, organizations and community groups. Through this, they realize:

1. There are many groups who care about this!
2. There are pre-existing networks!
3. We can play an important role as a connector and by joining existing efforts!
4. No one thinks reading aloud is a bad idea!



One learning conversation led to our contact walking us around the South of Downtown neighborhood, introducing us to key community players including businesses such as El Chaparro Mexican Restaurant and Pan Dulce Bakery.

This was a key learning moment regarding the granular level on which long-lasting relationship-building and impact happens in community.



As we asked questions and listened to a variety of voices from the South of Downtown Neighborhood in particular, opportunities blossomed. We gained access into the Family Literacy programs of two schools within the area, Everett Elementary and McPhee Elementary. Through relationships within our leadership team, we were connected with the South of Downtown Community Development Organization, an organization deeply rooted in the community whose staff includes community organizers. These community organizers are now part of the Support for Parents-South of Downtown group as well as the Coalition.

Additionally, our backgrounds as school librarians in Lincoln Public Schools led us to a learning conversation with the bilingual liaison from Everett Elementary School. As we discussed our initiative and Elizabeth her role as a liaison, she began to share her ideas on how we could become more engaged with the neighborhood. By the end of our discussion, she volunteered to walk us around the neighborhood introducing us to key community players including businesses, such as El Chaparro Mexican Restaurant and Pan Dulce Bakery. This was a key learning moment for us about the importance of truly “getting into” the existing fabric of community on the most local level. The experience also led to our decision to extend our work to several other neighborhoods in Lincoln experiencing higher levels of poverty.

Thanks to ABCD for teaching us the great value of learning conversations, we also developed relationships with churches, day cares, Clinic with a Heart and the community centers, as well as with the Family Literacy families and non-profits located in the South of Downtown.

These relationships have guided our initiative in a significant way. We have learned to talk less and listen more. We realized the importance of asking the right questions to start the conversations.

The relationships and collaborations we formed also guided us to adjust other aspects of our original plan. For example, we continue to promote reading challenges for families and children but have not focused on the number of minutes read as much as the importance of reading each day from birth to age 8. We learned that we need to have reading events in conjunction with other early childhood family celebrations and events in order to reach a larger audience.

Looking back on this year, we have catalyzed the community through a public engagement process across the city that began with learning, listening, and relationship-building.

We have shared presentations with families, early childhood organizations, and service groups; created partnerships at neighborhood and professional events; shared our story through local television, newspapers, e-newsletters, social media (Facebook and Instagram) and word of mouth. **People across Lincoln are now telling our story. We have members of the community coming to us with ideas rather than us knocking on their doors.** For instance, one high school student council called and wanted to do a book drive for us. A local Barnes and Noble had an annual holiday book drive, donating books to a community cause, and this year Read Aloud Lincoln is that community cause. They have donated more than 2100 books from their campaign. A local author donated hundreds of his books for the upcoming Early Childhood Family Fair.

Additional accomplishments include:

- The annual Read Aloud Lincoln event Colors and Patterns: Stories in Our Community, whose primary focus was on the families living in the South of Downtown Neighborhood
- Creation of a vibrant, productive coalition group made up of the museums and libraries, our working and advisory groups, and a group of community leaders who meet quarterly to discuss sustainability and set goals
- There are weekly, monthly, and quarterly family events in and outside the walls of the libraries and museums that allow the partners to work together to promote reading aloud and literacy
- All of the museums have created at least one reading nook within their buildings. Several other organizations now have reading nooks as well. Encouraging businesses to provide book nooks and literacy resources for their employees’ children is a goal for the upcoming year.
- Provided online methods of communication (website, social media, emails) about the importance of reading aloud from birth to 8, a monthly calendar of free literacy events, downloadable materials for families and organizations, and reading challenges



- Book donations, with distribution throughout the city
- Training sessions for staff, volunteers, boards, and community stakeholders
- Creation of a popular brand design and marketing plan

We have also witnessed the following aspects of the community and the early childhood learning landscape grow stronger over the course of the project:

- The level of community engagement
- Willingness of service organizations to support children by providing books, sponsoring literacy events and using their voices to advocate for reading aloud to children throughout Lincoln.
- Collaboration and promotion of the Read Aloud Lincoln goals by the partner museums and city libraries are more evident both within their institutions and out in the community.
- A better focus on enhancing programs that were already in place, e.g. Family Literacy classes
- Increased community recognition of the museums’ promotion of early childhood education for families

CHALLENGES

While many aspects of the process have developed in a way that was surprisingly natural, the work has been challenging as well. As mentioned above, one consistent challenge has been to remain focused and learn to say “no” and prioritize our efforts as learning conversations revealed countless collaborative opportunities around the community. Additionally, we have found that it is tricky to balance the need to focus on educating parents with the need to get funding for more books for children. Transportation is one of the biggest challenges for families experiencing poverty, making it difficult for them to get to the libraries and museums to participate in programming or classes.

Additional challenges included:

- Changing personnel at partner museums as well as at the non-profit groups we work with and the changing players in our community and how to continue to move forward.
- Directly reaching the many families with preschool children who are not on our radar
- Language barriers and the need for translations into more languages

LEARNINGS & IMPACT ON PROJECT ORGANIZATIONS & INDIVIDUALS

In addition to impacting the community, our work catalyzing community has impacted us as well—as individuals, as a team and as an organization.

We found that this unique kind of work called upon us to develop some new skills and strengthen existing ones:

- Learning from non-profits and our partners how to ask for funding
- Teaching and storytelling skills
- Empathy, understanding the challenges of multiple learning styles and abilities
- Administrative skills involving time management, planning, setting goals
- We learned these from our experiences in public education and library management
- Presenting to others was a skill we had and have used extensively

Personally, Read Aloud Lincoln co-director Nancy Larimer, has gained “a better appreciation and knowledge of the many organizations, groups and individuals who are working hard to assure that Lincoln’s youngest children will be successful when they enter kindergarten.” She is also “more appreciative of the unending generosity of people and businesses in our community and better educated about the needs and challenges of Lincoln’s underserved families.”

The team has learned that successful community engagement involves using community assets to make decisions about what residents actually want and can use, as opposed to what we had in mind for them. The learning conversations have been vital in knowing how to best interact with the community members and begin to focus on creating experiences to address their goals and wishes.

Additionally, our partners are working together on projects and events more and more. It has expanded partnerships between libraries and health clinics, museums and parent groups, for example. Independent collaborations among the working group are taking place regularly, without the oversight or planning by the co-directors. While the working group has always been creative, enthusiastic and cohesive, they are now really rolling along independently. This initiative has also resulted in more institutions thinking differently about how they listen to families.

LEARNINGS FOR THE FIELD

This year of activity has yielded numerous lessons for the team about catalyzing community, both in general and around early childhood learning.

The team’s most significant realizations along the way have been that they must zero in on parents and child caregivers, and engage with them both as recipients of programming and as potential leaders and partners in the work. This also presents the biggest hurdle, as the partners work to reach the parents to educate them on the importance of reading aloud each day for at least 15 minutes from birth to age 8.

Looking back, several things allowed the work to be easier and more energized from the start:

- The importance of accurate translations of resource materials and bilingual liaisons as translators for presentations and events with families.
- The directors’ background in public education and public libraries gave them connections with the right people to talk to from the beginning, removing barriers and saving time. Understanding the internal structures of each was beneficial.
- Being able to leverage existing relationships was key, such as having the support of Prosper Lincoln allowing us immediate acceptance and inclusion in valuable discussions, as well as asking others with whom we had pre-existing relationships to make introductions for us within the community.



According to co-director Mary Reiman, **“We learned that there is momentum, resources and energy around early childhood education in the community we weren’t previously aware of.** As we proceeded, the large number of early childhood organizations doing similar work surprised us, and we have come to appreciate the catalytic power of connecting and convening groups with shared priorities.” The creation of several new networks of these entities has helped everyone learn more about their organizations and enables people to work together more efficiently. Additionally, the museums are much more committed to the education of the very young, as seen in the increased programming for the youngest visitors.

Museums and libraries can most effectively partner with and support community by bringing them together to brainstorm ideas and plan collaborative projects. There’s no shortage of creativity and enthusiasm. Additionally, because public libraries have a wide variety of programming and people trained for this, they can more easily provide storytimes at the museums. Museum programming for early learners can have great impact, but entry fees can be a barrier to families’ participation.

.....

“Museums and libraries can most effectively partner with and support community by bringing them together to brainstorm ideas and plan collaborative projects. There’s no shortage of creativity and enthusiasm.”



For those embarking on a similar journey as a community catalyst, the Read Aloud Lincoln team offers the following advice:

- **Network with others with similar goals or passion,** and look for ways you can support and/or connect existing efforts and networks.
- **When presenting to families whose first language is not English,** remember to acknowledge the value of reading in their first language as well as reading in English. Both experiences give their child more words in their word bank.
- **Don’t rush into providing large numbers of print materials.** Wait to see what is really needed/wanted/useful. Have print materials translated into the languages spoken within the community by members of the community, rather than using an online translation tool.
- **Think about sustainability from the beginning.** Always keep in mind the sustainability rather than looking at it as a 2-year initiative. Call this Phase 1 and sustainability will be phase 2.
- **Keep in mind that we are creating a systems change,** not simply creating another program for citywide implementation. We are building a framework to make Read Aloud Lincoln part of the culture and fabric of our city.



Prepared for the Institute of Museum and Library Services by the DePaul University and ABCD Evaluation Team in collaboration with the Haggerty Museum of Art. Photos courtesy of the Haggerty Museum of Art.



TO LEARN MORE:

Lincoln Community Foundation
<https://readaloudlincoln.org>

IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative
www.imls.gov/issues/national-initiatives/community-catalyst-initiative