

Rural Libraries and Collective Impact: Catalysts for Accelerating Educational Outcomes

Berea College, as lead applicant, will address IMLS's strategic goal of **Building Capacity**. Our key partners, the librarians and education coordinators from the nation's rural Promise Zones (PZs), were instrumental in shaping this project. The project category is **Community Catalysts**. The project will enhance collaboration between rural libraries and community stakeholders by building libraries' capacity to 1) identify community needs, 2) activate and align partners in addressing needs and 3) leverage existing resources to address needs. As a result, educational outcomes for children and youth will be accelerated. The phase of maturity is **Piloting**. Three-year funding requested is **\$440,022** with \$440,022 cost-share.

National Need: A zip code should not determine a child's opportunity for educational success. Young people in rural America attend college and graduate high school at lower rates than their urban counterparts¹. With 72% of the country rural², and more than 8.9 million youth living in rural communities³, it is imperative that the rural-urban college access and success gap be addressed early in a child's educational journey. Reading at grade level by third grade is a key benchmark in a child's educational trajectory. Research clearly demonstrates that children who cannot read by third grade face significant barriers to higher education access and success. The most compelling research comes from a University of Chicago study, which found that less than 20 percent of students who were reading below grade level at 3rd grade attended college, compared to about a third of students who were reading at grade level, and nearly 60 percent of students who were reading above grade level⁴.

Project Design: Collective impact is an innovative and structured approach to making collaboration work across government, business, philanthropy, non-profit organizations and citizens to achieve significant and lasting impact⁵. Collective impact is successful when organizations align efforts and create a common agenda and shared measurements to solve a community problem. Collective impact has proven effective in improving 3rd grade reading outcomes in urban and suburban areas across the nation. We hypothesize that collective impact can be effective in rural places and can accelerate educational outcomes, including 3rd grade reading.

Libraries anchor rural places. They are essential partners in a rural collective impact movement designed to improve third-grade reading outcomes. Our IMLS planning grant engaged librarians from the rural PZs who had an interest in deepening collaborative action in their community. The librarians were essential to the development of our *Collective Impact Framework for Rural Libraries* (Framework) which forms the foundation of this Pilot. Our Framework puts a rural lens on the impactful urban and suburban collective impact models including the models of StriveTogether and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The rural lens is informed by our experience implementing collective impact within rural education settings and by our rural librarian partners' expertise in supporting 3rd grade reading and other outcomes in rural places.

We hypothesize that in rural places, libraries are fundamental partners and essential to collective impact efforts. With a clear framework for action, they can utilize strategic collaborations to improve educational outcomes and ultimately the well-being of children and youth. Our Pilot will utilize two delivery mechanisms – a cohort and an intensive focus - to implement the Framework.

First, we will support a cohort of ten rural librarians in implementing the Framework to accelerate 3rd grade reading. These rural libraries will enter into this cohort with experience in working on 3rd grade reading. Support will include an annual convening, quarterly webinars, and monthly coaching calls. The rural librarians will apply the framework in their community, share lessons learned, and receive continuous improvement feedback from our coaches and their peers.

Second, we will work intensively in two rural communities to dig deeper into the two roles a rural library can play in collective impact – that of backbone and of aligned partner. These two roles were identified during planning. It is essential that we develop resources unique to each role. The two intensive communities selected will have differing ecosystems: (1) a rural community where there is an organization interested in leading the

collective impact efforts and the library will be a key partner, and; (2) a rural community where there is no organization ready to serve as the lead and the library will fulfill the lead role. Each intensive community will pull together a community team focused on 3rd grade reading. The team will receive training, coaching, and support. Staff will guide the team through the process of establishing 3rd grade reading indicators; aligning contributions; discussing roles of organizations in providing lead support; determining strategies, and moving to action. The community will use local disaggregated data to identify gaps in educational outcomes to understand the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable children and youth.

Each of our delivery mechanisms – the cohort and the intensive communities - will enhance collaboration between rural libraries and community stakeholders by building librarians' capacity to 1) identify community needs, 2) activate and align partners in addressing needs and 3) leverage existing resources to address needs. Our partner librarians encouraged a focus on leveraging existing resources. Thus, our project design includes a fiscal mapping component that will be led by our partner the Children's Funding Project⁶. Fiscal mapping is a process where communities identify and analyze existing resources. Fiscal mapping offers valuable data about gaps, duplication, or opportunities to leverage resources.

Evaluation: Our project will be assessed through a formative and summative evaluation, led by our staff and REACH of Louisville. Our evaluation will examine how engagement by a rural library in a collective impact initiative contributes to 3rd grade reading outcomes. REACH has evaluated a cradle to career collective impact project in rural America, and has the context to conduct an effective evaluation in rural settings.

Diversity Plan: Diversity is at the core of this work. Rural America has long been overlooked. Rural America is diverse with one in four children in rural America being a child of color. The diversity is illustrated by the rural PZs which are located in Florida, Kentucky, Puerto Rico and South Carolina. Each PZ is characterized by high poverty and low educational attainment. The racial makeup of each community varies as well as the geographic and environmental conditions. These diverse rural voices will continue to inform the Pilot and our Pilot will continue to engage diverse rural communities.

National Impact: Our work will have a national impact by filling a gap within the collective impact field by providing a guide on how rural communities in general, and rural libraries specifically, can use collective impact to accelerate community outcomes. During the Pilot's last phase we will create and disseminate a national guide for rural librarians that will include a revised *Collective Impact Framework for Rural Libraries*. The guide will include a deep dive into 1) how rural libraries can accelerate 3rd grade reading through the use of collective impact, 2) the role of collective impact lead that libraries can play with the structures and supports needed, 3) the role of collective impact aligned partner that libraries can play and the structures and supports needed, 4) how fiscal mapping can be used to align existing resources, and 5) essential steps for rolling out a collective impact approach to 3rd grade reading. The guide will be disseminated nationally by staff and librarians at collective impact, rural and library events.

Budget: The 3 year budget is \$440,022 to include \$193,020 staff wages; \$21,000 travel; \$45,000 evaluation; \$130,500 consultants; \$6,000 dissemination; \$4,500 program materials; and \$40,002 indirect. A national philanthropic partner is expected to provide the majority of the \$440,022 in cost sharing.

¹ USDA Rural Education at a Glance 2017

² <http://www.aasa.org/rural-report-17.aspx>

³ http://www.ruraldataportal.org/docs/HAC_Taking-Stock-Conditions.pdf

⁴ Lesnick, J., Goerge, R., Smithgall, C., & Gwynne J. (2010). *Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment?* Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

⁵ <https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/collective-impact-terminology>

⁶ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b75d96ccc8fedfce4d3c5a8/t/5d091df74395200001db352c/1560878583319/Menu+of+Services+%28CFP%29.pdf>