Acknowledgement

This report would not be possible without so many individuals in the community giving so kindly of their time, expertise and energy. It speaks to the high regard this community has for the work of McAuley Ministries Foundation and the Consultant wishes to thank everyone who shared so willingly. Stakeholders are very knowledgeable about the issues our target communities face, and they are working every day to address them. This report is the result of a cross-functional collaboration with these individuals.
BACKGROUND

In March 2017, McAuley Ministries Foundation (MMF) commissioned an assessment of community engagement and support for setting the goal that every young person in MMF’s target communities be proficient in reading by third grade. The assessment was undertaken by Sonia Layne-Gartside (the Consultant) over the course of two months. This initiative seeks to assess support for changing the paradigm for literacy in these communities, laying the groundwork for a far-reaching goal that would improve the odds that all children will be ready for college, work and life.

Working cooperatively, the Consultant conducted numerous information gathering interviews and focus groups with a cross-section of community leaders in the target communities: Parents, educators, funders, early childcare providers and nonprofit advocates (see Appendix A for the list of stakeholders). The information gathered has been employed to gauge interest and commitment, possible alliances, and gather ideas and resources for setting and achieving the goal.

Based on the analysis of the data collected throughout this process, the report will be able to:

1. Gauge interest and commitment to the goal.
2. Highlight possible alliances, gather ideas and resources for setting and achieving the goal.
3. Identify the critical success factors and challenges to assuring cross-sector collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and community outreach and involvement.
4. Recommend a program organizational structure.

THE COMMUNITY’S PERSPECTIVE

“If you want to make change, begin by making culture. Begin by organizing a tightly knit group. Begin by getting people in sync.” – Seth Goodwin

The feedback has shown that there is indeed high engagement and a keen sense of community ownership for this goal. However, stakeholders are also deeply aware of the challenges that impede its achievement: Inconsistent parent engagement and support, inadequately resourced schools, and fragmented and/or inaccessible community resources. They strongly emphasize that these challenges will need to be addressed at a community-wide level to achieve any progress on this multifaceted goal.

Stakeholders believe that creating healthy conditions that promote child development and reduce trauma early on at home, in schools and the community is the key to achieving children reading proficiently by third grade. There is also agreement that children in the target communities will greatly benefit from public and private funders, who can create more strongly aligned leadership
and family supports that foster better early childhood development. These key components can be graphically represented as such:

**Figure 1: Alliances and Conditions Necessary for Success**

These are the alliances, resources and conditions that community stakeholders believe must be nurtured and harnessed in the endeavor to set and achieve this goal.

Each component will be explored to highlight the critical success factors and recommendations identified in the stakeholder interviews and parent focus groups.
PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

“This region is resource rich, but navigating it can be hard for parents.” – LouAnn Ross

In our target communities, it is universally acknowledged that no parent will say “I do not want my children to succeed”, or “I do not want my child to graduate from college”. But the realities are that some parents are invested in making it happen, while other are not. According to the parents in the focus group and all other stakeholders, a parent or a caring adult who is one hundred percent committed (i.e. someone who pays attention and is involved every day), will significantly increase the chances of a child being able to read proficiently by third grade. Without this person, a child faces a longer and harder road to reading proficiently.

Engaged Parents and Caring Adults
Parents/caring adults who are engaged in a meaningful way still need support in critical areas: (1) Figuring out how to navigate a pathway to success for their child from birth; (2) information on where to focus their efforts for their children to be able to read proficiently; and (3) how to navigate social and school services to access needed resources in time.

Pittsburgh is a city filled with parenting and education support resources, yet many parents in our target communities are unaware of them, or left alone to navigate the resource maze to help their children succeed. A significant portion of the networking time before and after the focus groups was spent with parents and caring adults (e.g. aunts, grandparents) sharing information on available resources with each other. The details of these resources do not permeate into their day-to-day lives in a consistent, easily understood and accessible format. This issue impacts even those parents with the financial means to pay for needed services. Another lament was that when found, parents often had to go outside of the neighborhood to access these resources.

With engaged parents, when they know better, they do better. In low-income communities like these, the information is often not socialized in an easily accessible manner. The early childhood educators in the community indicated that parent education is very successful when it solves the current problems a parent is having. Catching a parent who needs help for their child with homework, or helping a parent to find a therapist for their child who is “acting out”, for example, are the key ways in which parent education resonates and helps to change behavior. These parents are asking to be educated and empowered so they can determine the actions they should be taking to help their children to read proficiently.
They also need help understanding and navigating available resources to determine a path of success for their children.

**Disengaged Parents**

Parents and stakeholders are resigned to the fact that there will be some parents who either will not step up, or are incapable of doing so. Committed parents care deeply about their peers’ lack of engagement and struggle with how to get them involved. They note that the schools have tried everything to get parents involved, yet nothing appears to work. This elicited varying reactions in the focus groups:

- Some led with compassion, indicating that these parents are in pain and are struggling, and they withhold judgment “because no one really knows what others are going through”.

- The majority responded with frustration that so many parents refuse to pay attention to their children, despite the numerous efforts made by themselves, schools, and advocates to get them more involved. They believe that parents need to be held accountable for their actions, and it was very tiring seeing the same few parents showing up again and again. They felt these parents only showed up at schools to complain and to create disruptive conflict. The schools’ parent engagement professionals speak of unanswered phone calls and disappearing parents.

- Yet others felt encouraged and insisted that we can all build on the few who are engaged.

There is no doubt that the key to achieving the MMF’s stated goal lies in the answers to the questions: How do you help those children for whom home support and parent engagement is practically nonexistent? How do you get more parents on board as a partner? How do you find a caring adult for each child? The answers are complex and compounded by the fact that there are multiple reasons why parents are not engaged (see Figure 2).

The perception among parents at the focus group, is that the reason for each parent’s disengagement is unique to them. Each parent has his or her own story to tell. Therefore, the solution as to how to engage them is also unique to them. This issue cannot be approached with one broadband response, it requires solutions that are specifically tailored to individuals, which makes it harder.
Figure 2: Eight Reasons Why Parents are Not Engaged

1. Lack of Confidence and/or Illiteracy
   School brings back memories of their own failure. There is an intimidation factor. They don’t feel they can help their children with homework or reading. Some parents are unable to read fluently and do not want anyone to know.

2. Drug and Alcohol Abuse
   Some parents are trapped in a cycle of smoking, weed, partying and drinking. Their focus is not on reading.

3. Ignorance
   Sometimes you just don’t know any better. Some parents do not realize how important it is for them to be involved. They simply repeat the parenting behaviors they saw and experienced growing up.

4. Mental Health Issues
   There are parents with undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues in this community. There is a lack of awareness of the extent mental health issues may be impacting parenting capacity.

5. Homelessness & Transiency
   Parents and children who are homeless, or are living in temporary housing. They have limited resources time and capacity in this chaotic lifestyle.

6. Finances & Everyday Survival
   Dealing with life and single parenting is stressful and parents often feel overwhelmed. Parents struggle financially to provide proper housing, food and to keep the utilities on.

7. Dangerous Lifestyle
   Some parents exacerbate the dangers in the neighborhood by associating with criminal elements. This is not an environment that is supportive to a child’s education and development.

8. Embarassment
   Some parents are ashamed or embarrassed to ask for help. Fear of the stigma causes them to hide certain issues.

Source: Parent Focus Groups
Community stakeholders emphasize that this complexity made for an impact that tear at the social fabric of these families. The phrase one repeatedly heard as a consequence of these various disengagement factors was “trauma”, children and families dealing with trauma. It shows up in varying ways, overwhelming parents’ coping mechanisms and undermining children’s ability to learn.

The result, is that the approach taken for early childcare development for these children, particularly from birth to three years old (the most active period of brain development), is singularly deficient. Too many children in our target communities lack the early interventions and interactions needed to shape the foundation for their future well-being and learning. In many of these homes, childcare takes the form of babysitting, and not early childhood education and development.

**EARLY CHILDCARE IN OUR TARGET COMMUNITIES**

**QUALITY:** Early childhood development programs are rated using the method of Keystone STARS: Standards are grouped into four levels: STAR 1, STAR 2, STAR 3, and STAR 4. In the Hill District, only three providers outside of the school district pre-K programs have a STAR 3 (one provider), or STAR 4 (two providers) rating (Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), Informational Report, April 7th, 2017).


“The Hill District community has high levels of child raising vulnerability compared to other census tracts of Allegheny County. Perhaps more alarming is that the risk levels are considerably lower in the census tracts that neighbor the Hill District. Specifically, the Hill District has high levels of single parents who could benefit from high quality child care.”

“Similar to other Pittsburgh communities, a specific focus on early childhood is absent from community development planning in the Hill District. Child care resources are mentioned in the Hill District Master Plan, but a strategy to support them and work towards a community that is focused on the success of its youngest members so that they are prepared to excel in school and life has yet to be articulated.”

“The quantity of resources and attention given to school-age children in the Hill District outnumber those for younger children.”

“Center-based programs are a great asset to the Hill District community and each of them is actively participating in Keystone STARS. The number of home-based providers is low compared to other areas of Pittsburgh, but the prevalence of young children being cared for by family, friends, or neighbors (FFN) necessitates increased engagement and support for these individual providers. Research shows that the quality of care in home-based settings differs greatly, and regulated home-based care continuously demonstrates higher levels of care than FFN care. There is definitely a need for targeted strategies to engage family, friend and neighbor caregivers and to provide them with needed resources, technical assistance, professional development, and play and learn opportunities where trained staff model activities that tailored to the unique circumstances of FFN care.”
Fortunately, the community does paint a picture of a spectrum of parent engagement: from those who are invested down to those who are not available at all:

**Figure 3: Spectrum of Parent Engagement**

- **Engaged:** Pays attention every day to the child. Supportive of child, responsive and actively participates in all events. E.g. regularly visits the school to ask questions and dialogue with teachers. They see themselves in partnership with the school in helping their children to read.

- **Involved:** Does what they can and tries to do what the school tells them to do. Shows up for some events as time and resources permit. E.g. usually pays attention when things are going wrong.

- **Unsupportive:** Overwhelmed with their own problems and unable to engage in any consistent activities to help their child’s development and education. E.g. moves a lot, send their children to school unprepared.

- **Not available:** Does not respond to phone calls, blocks the school’s number, and does not show up to any events. E.g. they will take the medication prescribed for their children and send them to school unmedicated.

There are a lot of parents between “not available” and “engaged” that MMF can start with, if they choose to approach the goal from this perspective. When families are open to a level of support, it works. Stakeholders (parents, educators, community advocates) offered several recommendations to remove barriers, expand opportunities and support parents:
Table 1: Feedback and Recommendations on Parent Engagement
(Source: Taken primarily from the Parent Focus Groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY FACTORS FOR READING SUCCESS</th>
<th>ACTIONS PARENTS/CARING ADULTS TAKE TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN TO READ BETTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. An engaged parent or a caring adult in every home.</td>
<td>▪ Expose children to books as early as possible, as much as possible: Begin while you are pregnant and read aloud to them when they are babies. Do everything as early as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Parents/caring adults who understand that “it starts at home”: Attention to early childhood care is critical to reading proficiently.</td>
<td>▪ Have a lot of books in your home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Paying attention: Educating and empowering parents/caring adults to be able to create a pathway to success for their children, identify issues early and to seek immediate assistance.</td>
<td>▪ Have books that they can see themselves in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Effective outreach to parents/caring adults through children: You reach parents through their children. Focus on what a child needs, solve parents’ problems associated with fulfilling those needs and you will get the attention of parents.</td>
<td>▪ Take your children to the library every week.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

▪ Have your children practice reading: E.g. by asking them to read signs, billboards, mileage on the car, prices in grocery store, ask them to help you find items in the grocery store, the time off the stove, etc. “I let my granddaughter read the mail to me” (Focus group participant).

▪ Allow children to choose their own books. “I choose three books for her when we go to the library every week. I choose books that will help her to learn something, and then I allow her to choose any two books that she wants in any area. That way, we’re both happy” (Focus group participant).

▪ Choose books for them that has a narrative and a great story to tell. Series are particularly good.

▪ Have children pick an interest and then select books on that topic. “My granddaughter chose Martin Luther King” (Focus Group participant).

▪ Make reading fun and interesting: “I tell my children that you can sit in one chair and travel around the world” (Parent focus group participant).

▪ Turn off the television and have children read.

▪ Take away the tablet and give your child a choice of reading a book or writing a story about their day.

▪ Start pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) reading to them as early as possible.

▪ Find time to spend with your children and be patient with them.

▪ Have children read to you. Then ask them questions about what they read.

▪ Let your children see you reading (Reading is Fundamental (RIF) and the library has adult books that you can borrow).
**Which Programs Work**

- Reading is Fundamental (RIF): There is great love for this program and parents asked for it expanded beyond grade three. The story mobile program is by far the one that every parent and caring adult references and approves of: “We love RIF” (focus group participants).
  
  - Carnegie Library – everyone believes the library is doing an excellent job: “the library is so important for getting our kids to read” (Focus group participant).

Between RIF, schools and the library, parents believe that there are plenty of books available to children in our target communities.

**What Parents Struggle With**

- How to help active children sit still and read.
- How do you interest reluctant readers?
- How do you help children who spend too much time on tablets?
- How to adjust strategies for different children: “in my home my third grader (girl) loves to read, but my first grader (boy) does not” (Focus group participant).
- How to instill the habits and discipline in our children for learning: “I give in with my niece, she is just so cute” (Focus Group participant).
- How to get other parents to pay attention? How to help people change and/or want to change?
- How to help children articulate their feelings and deal productively with their struggles. They blow up, going “from 0-100” during conflict.
- How to stop people from placing low expectations on their children.

  People are unaware of what is needed to help a child to read proficiently: “My neighbor said to me: ‘Aren’t you too hard on your kids, asking them to read so much?’” (Focus group participant).
- How to identify reading difficulties: “you cannot flag it if you don’t see it” (Focus Group participant).
- How to find books that interest their children.

**Best Ways to Communicate With Parents**

- Facebook
- Text messaging
- Flyers/letters to go home in students’ backpacks (sometimes children take these out of their backpacks and parents don’t always receive them).

**What’s Needed**

- Ongoing workshops that helps parents deal with their own trauma so that they can in turn help their children deal with trauma.
- Funding to host reading nights at schools for parents and children on a consistent basis. These events are usually successful, but they happen too infrequently to make a lasting impact.
- Planned interventions to help parents address the issues they struggle with.
- Help getting children ready for the transition to kindergarten.
Parenting support groups – sharing strategies on how to utilize the what they know and learn.

Link enrollment in afterschool programs to parents’ mandatory attendance at update sessions.

More information on the issues that impact children’s ability to read: “People don’t know what they don’t know” (Focus group participant). When parents know better they can do better: E.g. on how to prepare children for success in school, how to recognize when children are not learning or developing well, the best way to handle children who are “acting up”, how to encourage more reading at home. This research about third grade reading is key to reinforcing how important reading is to a child’s success, yet no parents participating in the focus groups had ever heard about it.

Table 2: Feedback and Recommendations on Parent Support
(Source: All Community Stakeholders)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT’S NEEDED</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Families need to be tied into support networks. Family support centers are needed to address crisis moments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents should receive infant and toddler development education: Programs and interventions that span prenatal wellness to how to foster early learning and child development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help in creating literacy rich environments at home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Universal pre-K education for the community: need more quality STAR 3 and STAR 4 rated early childhood programs in these neighborhoods.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expand RIF programs beyond grades one to three.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A community campaign that informs parents and caring adults about the value of reading to their child. Too many parents do not get these messages in our neighborhoods.</td>
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<tr>
<td>High touches – programs that interact with parents and caregivers several times a month. One time programs do not make an impact.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reach families where they are. Don’t ask them to come to things which adds to their overwhelm. Figure out where they are and bring the programs /interventions to them: In their homes, library, etc.</td>
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</table>
“Parents are the most powerful lever to influence the community and the schools, but it is so hard to get the engagement.” -Parent in focus group
QUALITY SCHOOLS

“The socioeconomic profile of a district is a powerful predictor of the average test score performance of students in that district. Nonetheless, poverty is not destiny…” (Reardon, 2016)

Stakeholders believe that what happens in the home is equally as important as what happens in the classroom. When one examines the elementary schools in our target communities in relation to third grade reading proficiency, it is not surprising to see the issues which so powerfully impacted parent engagement, also having an impact on school performance.

**Figure 4: Third Grade Reading Proficiency Level at Schools in Target Communities**

The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) measures how well students have performed in reading, mathematics, science and writing according to Pennsylvania’s academic standards. Since the PSSA taken by Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) students in 2015 measured different content than in years past, it is not useful to directly compare students’ scores to previous years. 2015 results serve as a baseline year for measuring future growth.

**Figure 5: Percentage of Students Identified as Economically Disadvantaged at Schools in Target Communities**

Students are identified as economically disadvantaged based on the State’s Direct Certification Process.

**Figure 6: Teacher Effectiveness at Schools in Target Community**

The percentage of teachers who performed at “Proficient” and “Distinguished” levels, according to the district’s measures of teacher effectiveness. The other performance levels are “Needs Improvement” and “Failing”.

Data Sources: A+ Schools, Pittsburgh Community Alliance for Public Education; Report to the Community, 2015, 2016 Available online
The assessment paints a picture of K-5 schools: with proficient teachers; where the majority of third graders are unable to read proficiently (75% of third graders in Pittsburgh Weil and 78% in Pittsburgh Miller); and where most children come from economically disadvantaged homes. PPS administrators\(^1\) report that based on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)\(^3\) and PSSA data points of these schools, students who are not reading proficiently are unable to decode\(^4\). Decoding is the foundation upon which all other reading instruction is built. A reader’s comprehension, motivation, engagement, and overall school performance is negatively impacted by decoding problems (Ryan, 2016). Students who cannot decode, struggle with vocabulary acquisition and use, as well as comprehension of complex texts.

Stakeholders attribute these results to the following factors:

1. **Lack of School Readiness and Parent Engagement**
   Children enter school without the firm foundation schools need to build on to deliver the desired educational outcomes. They start off behind their more privileged peers in other neighborhoods and struggle to catch up. This is a result of: (1) the lack of participation in quality pre-K programs. Children enter Kindergarten unprepared, lacking the social behaviors and foundational reading skills needed to thrive; and (2) the parental disengagement factors explored earlier. Children born into our target communities are not having the interactions with early caregivers that promote healthy brain development, build social and emotional skills and support language and literacy development. School readiness suffers, and for many, the first time these issues are revealed is from the results of the assessment children undergo upon entry into kindergarten.

2. **Inadequate Resources**
   Stakeholders acknowledge the need for extra support and resources to help students who enter their schools with a variety of issues, most of which result from repeated exposure to traumatic events beyond their control: E.g. learning disabilities, increasingly disruptive behaviors,

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\(^1\)“The Research-based Inclusive System of Evaluation (RISE) does not adequately differentiate between effective and ineffective teaching. (Some 97 percent of teachers in the district continue to be rated as proficient or distinguished, according to staff interviews).” Council of the Great City Schools. (2016). Review of the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Pg. 45.

\(^2\)Information reported to the Consultant by K-5 Curriculum Coordinator, Naomi York-Abdullah and K-12 Literacy Director, Kendra Wester

\(^3\)DIBELS are a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. Taken from: https://dibels.org/dibels.html

\(^4\)Decoding refers to the process of translating a printed word into a sound. Fostering this skill is at the center of reading instruction. Taken from: https://www.education.com/reference/article/what-is-decoding-reading/
difficulty regulating their emotions or paying attention, etc. Principals and teachers are overwhelmed, and not getting enough help from school systems that are ill-equipped to deal with these issues. Compounding their struggle, are schools grappling with reducing budgets. For example, Principal Henderson (Pittsburgh Weil) found the work her school did with the Early Literacy Specialists (ELS) to be phenomenal and greatly needed. PPS has now cut this position from 50 people serving the entire school district down to eight. Stakeholders also point to the inequities in access to resources that exist between PPS’s schools that need to be addressed. Resources are not the same across schools in the very same district. Principals in our target communities desperately need more resources, more hands-on-deck, and frankly, more financial autonomy to bring in professionals to support the work they see as necessary.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT
READING INTERVENTION STRATEGIES AT PITTSBURGH MILLER

1. Family Reading/Fun Nights (usually monthly, but not held consistently).

2. The Multi-tier support system (MTSS) team meets every week based on need and students being referred. Develops a support system for each child based on their developmental needs.

3. Literacy benchmarks – The DIBELS measures are brief, and are used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills. The DIBELS Assessment is given three times a year.
   a. When children don’t meet this exam goal, bi-weekly progress monitoring is done to check to see if each child is making up the difference.

4. There is a 30-minute reading intervention every day in class for children. This is a PPS district-wide initiative which encourages reading daily in the classroom.

5. Real time Intervention to practice reading skills: The Project Read More Initiative gives children time during the last 7 – 10 minutes of class at the end of each day to choose a book and sit and read.

6. Cultural arts after school program: reading, math, science, dance, history

Based on the standardized test scores, this collection of initiatives is not working.
3. **Curriculum that lacks Cultural Relevance and Lack of Mentors**

Students do not find the books they are asked to read in school interesting and relevant to their lives, nor do they see themselves (no evidence of “me”) in the curriculum. This factor puts up yet another barrier to learner engagement and interest. A curriculum is needed that ignites students’ interest and fosters the love of learning in areas that matter to them, their families and communities.

School principals emphasized that students also need to see more people who look like them, reflected in the school staff. Students lack positive African-American role models and mentors in positions of power in schools who can set positive examples to help break down negative racial stereotypes. Their views are validated by the latest research: According to a U.S. Department of Education (2016) report, 82% of the teaching force at public schools identify as white. In our target communities, public school teachers are predominantly white women coming from homogenous/suburban cultures, many are not equipped to deal with the challenges of race and trauma that affect their students.

Principals indicate that mentors, particularly male African-American mentors, are sorely needed in our target schools. A recent study has found that “Low-income black students who have at least one black teacher in elementary school are significantly more likely to graduate high school and consider attending college” (Gershenson; Hart; Lindsay & Papageorge, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education (2016) report highlights why:

“One report suggests that, compared with their peers, teachers of color are more likely to (1) have higher expectations of students of color (as measured by higher numbers of referrals to gifted programs); (Grissom & Redding, 2016) (2) confront issues of racism; (3) serve as advocates and cultural brokers; and (4) develop more trusting relationships with students, particularly those with whom they share a cultural background” (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).”

Stakeholders (parents, educators, community advocates) offered several recommendations to remove barriers, expand opportunities and support schools:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT’S NEEDED</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family engagement, high quality early childhood care (pre-K and after school), and more investment and focus on these young children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help parents to become as Principal Starkes-Ross (Pittsburgh Miller) says: “to be accountable, dependable and available (ADA)”</td>
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</tbody>
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**Table 3: Feedback and Recommendations on Quality Schools**

(Source: All Community Stakeholders)
Two key time periods need to be strengthened:

**SCHOOL READINESS**

**Pre-K:**
- All the recommendations from parent support (Table 2).
- Universal pre-K education for the community.
- Give funding to pre-K childcare agencies to support their move to STAR 3 or STAR 4 ratings (it takes about $50,000 to move to a STAR 3 rating).

**K - 3:**
- In addition to expanding RIF programs beyond grades one – three, increase RIF interventions to two times a week at recess.
- Transition to third grade: Parents believe that the transition to third grade is hard for children. Expectations change and it gets harder and more difficult for children to adjust. School becomes more rigorous. Third grade testing starts. Parent complaints increase. Second grade is where they begin to see the issues. There is a need for more support in the transition between second and third grade.
- Quality (i.e. licensed) after-school programs are not recognized as a critical lever for academic success. It’s seen as a convenience and as babysitting and many people turn to unlicensed programs. Educate parents on the need to send their children to licensed after-school programs.
- Fund an after-school program at the library. Older children (who come in after being asked to be still in school all day and who do not want to sit still to read) treat it as one. The library is not resourced for it. Funding for an official licensed one is needed to support the library.
- Parent support: tutoring services, small group tutoring, licensed after-school programs. These programs already exist, invest in increasing access to them and upgrading them.
- Advocate to include reading in after-school programs.
- Invest in more Summer reading programs. Summer learning loss is very real. Yet, not everyone sees the value. E.g. only 44% of people who enrolled, attended regularly (24 out of 27 days) in PPS’s summer program. (Source: PPS Coordinator, Out-of-School Time)
- Help parents to be able to give children the tools they need to do homework and instill great study habits.
- Reduce the impact of Transiency: When children are transient, the transition of records and identified development issues with the child gets lost. The child has to start over.
  - For every five families, you have an assigned liaison/concierge who follows the family through early childhood (0 – 8 years). They are the one constant through the early life of that child. Give every child a pit crew that is assigned to them. PPS will have data on families that are hot spot for challenges, one academic pit crew that supports the child and family. This is a policy that is needed and a solution that is needed.
**INADEQUATE** ▪ Full-time behavioral health professionals on staff.

**RESOURCES** ▪ Family support centers in schools need to be upgraded to address crisis moments in schools.
▪ Professional development for teachers around these topics that need to be addressed:
  o Mental health support.
  o How to teach children who are dealing with trauma.
  o Ability to see the potential in these students: “They are teachers who are standing in front of children that they don’t believe can learn. Lower expectations lead to a lowering of teaching standards”.

**RELEVANT** ▪ Funding to support enhancing the curricula so that it can be made more meaningful and relevant for the children in our target communities.

**CURRICULUM & MENTORS** ▪ Funding to buy more books where children can see themselves reflected.
▪ Funding for schools to create a male mentorship program. Elementary schools need to have male role models engaging with students both in school and in the community.
With a new Superintendent and a five-year strategic plan (entitled: ‘2017 – 2022 Strategic Plan: Expect Great Things’) in place, PPS has a new approach to the challenges that all its district. It is advisable to note these new solutions in determining the right investment/partnerships to make with PPS.

1. PARENT ENGAGEMENT
The school district’s Family, Youth and Community Engagement team within the office of the Superintendent will be adopting a new strategy for parent engagement: Epstein’s framework of Six Types of Engagement. The team is now focused on communicating this framework to parents.

   Source: Interview with PPS Coordinator of Family, Youth and Community Engagement

2. THE MOVE TOWARDS COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
Community schools are a new initiative of PPS, the schoolboard adopted the initiative in July 2016. The intent is to provide a holistic approach, one that brings a network of resources to the school, children and families that makes life and learning easier for all involved. Each school will need something different because each community is different. The intention is for community schools to reflect and look like their community.

Up to five schools will become designated community schools next year. A needs analysis will be conducted at each community school and a coordinator will be placed at the school to source the needed resources for the school. Both schools in our target communities have applied to become community schools.

   Source: Interview with PPS Coordinator, Community Schools

3. MAYOR FORMS A TASK FORCE ON UNIVERSAL PRE-K
As early as December, Pittsburgh could have a blueprint for broadening access to pre-kindergarten programs. City Council voted 9-0 Tuesday to create an early childhood task force charged with fostering an affordable preschool plan. Councilwoman Natalia Rudiak said she would like the effort to finish by year’s end.

“Right now, we don’t have enough high-quality slots in the City of Pittsburgh to accommodate the need” for pre-K education, said Ms. Rudiak, who sponsored the legislation with Council President Bruce Kraus. Mayor Bill Peduto is expected to sign the bill, administration spokesman Timothy McNulty said…Peduto will appoint up to 15 people to the group, including representatives for parents, Pittsburgh Public Schools and the philanthropic community, according to the legislation. A mayoral panel has encouraged universal pre-K access for all 3- and 4-year-old city residents, along with strategies to strengthen the programs task force’s agenda.

About 1,500 children in Pittsburgh lack access to full-day, high-quality preschool programs, according to a 2016 report from the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers. Fewer than 14 percent of providers registered in a Pennsylvania child care rating program have achieved a high-quality designation, the legislation shows. Pittsburgh Public Schools provides free, full-day preschool to children ages 3 to 5, funded through a combination of sources, including the state’s Head Start and Pre-K Counts initiatives. The Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center also provides free pre-K and Head Start to low-income children in four city neighborhoods. An extra $20 million a year would cover high-quality preschool for city youngsters who are not currently enrolled, according to Ms. Rudiak.

4. MAYOR’S OFFICE SEEKS TO WORK WITH PAEYC

Mayor William Peduto’s Administration is proposing to contract with the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children (PAEYC) to help the City implement universal Pre-Kindergarten and other programs to support Pittsburgh’s children.

“Our administration believes in supporting our youngest residents with the support and experiences that they need to lead to healthy and successful lives,” said the City's Early Childhood Manager Tiffini G. Simoneaux. "PAEYC works tirelessly in the community to support child care providers, young children and families. The proposed contract will assist the City in developing plans and initiatives to expand access to high quality early learning opportunities citywide.”


5. A MOVE AWAY FROM COLLECTIVE IMPACT

In line with the strategy to “partner with the community in a new way” outlined in the Whole Child, Whole Community plan, the District agreed to implement a pilot of Collective Impact. In April 2015, Pittsburgh Milliones school leadership and school staff voted to bring the Collective Impact pilot to their school and the Hill District community. On June 9 and 10, a two-day innovation workshop, facilitated by MAYA Design Inc. – a Pittsburgh-based design firm that specializes in human-centered design, was held with more than 100 participants representing Milliones leadership, staff and students, as well as PPS leadership, Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) leadership, service providers and community members.

“The Collective Impact model builds on the multiple partners who are working out of concern for the students who attend Pittsburgh Milliones,” said Errika Fearbry Jones, Executive Director of Internal/External Affairs and Project Lead. “Our plan today is the result of a group of individuals, from different perspectives, agreeing to work together to impact the academic success of our students.”

“Collective Impact does not work without the buy in and commitment of leadership, staff and community partners agreeing to come to the table and commit to working together to solve a problem,” said Jones. Once we had agreement, a smaller Vertical Design Team began meeting to develop a shared vision for the school.” The Vertical Design Team set out to answer the question -What attributes should the ideal successful graduate from Pittsburgh Milliones possess? The team outlined eight priorities: Skills Acquisition, Globally Competitive, Post- High School Plan, Belongingness, Esteem and Status, Giving Back, Psychological Needs and Safety to meet the developmental needs of students.

RESULT: The school year ended and changes occurred: The Principal changed and there was a huge fight among the students. Challenges and tensions occurred as a result and interventions were put in place. The school received a lot of needed resources and it was agreed that these should be led and controlled by the new Principal. The Collective impact approach was abandoned. There is a now a new policy approach of Community schools. PPS will no longer be engaging in the collective impact process.

Sources: Press Release of PPS, March 8, 2016; Interview with PPS Coordinator of Family, Youth and Community Engagement
COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Stakeholders agree that one of the main requirements to fulfilling any goal associated with third grade reading proficiency is the availability of high quality environmental support that enable children to take full advantage of their intellectual potential at home, school and in the community. In low-income neighborhoods, an integrated series of program supports (spanning prenatal wellness to third grade) is necessary, so that as one program ends another seamlessly takes its place. If not, environmental disadvantages will reassert themselves.

This process begins by showcasing the available, accessible and coordinated community resources that connect children and families to the critical supports that already exist. Our target communities are affected by several socioeconomic factors, having a resource that highlights the programs that ameliorate the negative effects will be extremely helpful in achieving the stated goal. The major recommendation offered by stakeholders:

- Develop a comprehensive Community Resource Guide and Roadmap that:
  1. Maps the program supports that are available (both in and outside of the community). E.g. access to high-quality basic services: quality early childcare programs, health and mental well-being services, health care, transportation, housing, financial supports; etc.
  2. Lay out the pathway from birth to third grade that should be taken to help children to be able to read proficiently in a way that is easy for parents and caring adults to see and reference continuously; and
  3. Ensure that expecting parents, current parents/caring adults and community stakeholders can easily access, distribute and utilize this roadmap and resource guide when needed.

The community should be able to draw upon a relevant and updated resource that helps them to survive and then to thrive by expertly navigating social and school services.

LEADERSHIP & FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORT

The biggest concern among stakeholders as it relates to the goal of achieving third grade reading proficiency for every child in our target communities is the absence of leadership on this issue. Every stakeholder (parents, schools, PPS, healthcare workers, community organizations, funders, advocates, early childhood educators, mayor’s office, etc.) acknowledge that they are all working towards achieving third grade reading proficiency, but their efforts are siloed, lacking continuity and often not moving in the same direction or at the same speed. A leader who can unify and align stakeholders around a shared vision and accountability on this issue is needed.
Who will or should be the one to bring these many components together? Most stakeholders are looking to the funders, state officials and the Mayor’s office to provide that needed leadership. They anticipate that through the distribution of their funding dollars, and the setting of public policy by the Mayor’s office, these key stakeholders will set a vision that sends a strong signal on how stakeholders should be aligned.

The foundations interviewed for this process (The Grable Foundation and The Heinz Endowments) expressed great interest in working together with MMF. They believe that having funders all on the same page in approaching this issue will make a tremendous impact in achieving the goal. The foundation community have already begun discussions with state officials and the Mayor’s office on such a coalition. The Grable Foundation proposed that PAEYC (as the thought leader on this issue), should be where the alignment starts, or where the answer as to how to align around this issue reside.

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<tr>
<th>The Grable Foundation Areas of Focus</th>
<th>The Heinz Endowments Strategic Areas</th>
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<td><strong>EARLY CHILDHOOD:</strong> rich learning experiences in high-quality settings, led by caring and well-trained adults. Parents should have access to the support they need to encourage their children's development.</td>
<td><strong>CHILDREN, YOUTH &amp; FAMILIES:</strong> Helps children become stronger, more capable learners; assists families to thrive; and supports critical partners in improving children and youth’s learning and healthy development.</td>
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<td><strong>FAMILIES:</strong> Easy and frequent access to innovative learning and play spaces, community resources that support their well-being, and celebrations and cultural events that delight them.</td>
<td><strong>EDUCATION:</strong> Advocates for all children in grades K-12 and their families living in the Pittsburgh region, especially in distressed neighborhoods. Invests in efforts to cultivate strong teacher and administrator leadership, and community partnerships.</td>
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<td><strong>PUBLIC SCHOOLS:</strong> From pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, schools should ignite students’ interests, stretch their abilities, and set the path toward a successful future.</td>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY &amp; ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:</strong> devoted to increasing economic opportunity in the Pittsburgh region and improving the quality of life in communities facing social and economic challenges.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY:</strong> Children, families, and other caring adults should be able to draw upon a vibrant community of strong nonprofit organizations, focused on helping them succeed.</td>
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*Only those areas that impact third grade reading are highlighted here*
CONSULTANT’S RECOMMENDATION

“When a flower doesn’t bloom, we fix the environment in which it was planted, we don’t try to fix the flower.”  
Alexander Den Heijer

Community feedback has revealed the preferred approach for undertaking any goal associated with third grade reading proficiency: a cohesive approach among key stakeholders that rests on the foundations of a shared leadership vision and accountability.

The Consultant’s recommendation is that MMF should choose a specific focus for their approach: One that concentrates on early childhood education and development. The children in our target communities start behind and rarely, if ever, catch up. For this reason, the recommendation is that MMF places more emphasis on ensuring that children don’t fall behind. The resources to do this already exist in Pittsburgh, home to a rich preschool education environment, which for many reasons, is just not accessible in our target communities. The objective would be to maximize those critical years between birth and five years old to help parents and caregivers create the conditions at home that promote brain development and reduce childhood stress and trauma. Investing in a child’s foundation is much more effective than trying to “fix” the child and their issues upon entry to kindergarten. By then, all evidence shows that it is much too late for too many of our children.

This would require MMF to be early and consistent in reaching out to empower parents and caring adults through programs that repeatedly touch their lives:

1. Focus on early childhood (birth to five years) to significantly improve student readiness for Kindergarten. The aim is to upgrade and infuse the current child care systems in place with quality early education programming:
   a. Establish and/or reinforce the connections and cross-sector partnerships needed to set up the infrastructure and systems to influence infant and toddler care in our target communities: E.g. with PPS, parents, PAEYC, Department of Human Services, Foundations, etc.
   b. Sponsor an infant and toddler care strategy and program that ensures children meet critical milestones. It should span: Parent mindset, engagement and support; Prenatal wellness; early childhood language and literacy development, development screening and assessment, mental health, trauma and stress.
   c. Work with the Mayor’s office, the other foundations and community organizations like PAEYC to increase access to quality pre-K programs for children ages three to five in our target communities.
   d. Launch a community campaign to promote the importance of early education and development, reading in children’s lives, and placing children in quality pre-K programs.
   e. Educate and empower the family, friends and neighbors (FFN) network of childcare.
f. Support parents and children with needed resources in the transition to Kindergarten in our target schools.

2. Create and market the recommended comprehensive Community Guide to Family Support Resources that helps parents minimize daily life stressors: housing options, health services, employment programs, work incentives and support, etc. The goal is to make it simpler, easier and much more efficient to seek and get needed help.
   a. A special focus on resources that help improve the financial self-sufficiency of parents and caregivers is recommended. Do economic conditions i.e. employment issues affect third grade reading? Yes, it does. As one stakeholder indicted: “Having a good steady job has a positive impact on a child’s education” (Carol Barone-Martín). Lack of employment contributes for example, to the transient problem: children moving from school to school. As Principal Starkes-Ross explained: “moving school means getting accustomed to a new setting, new teacher. Each school curriculum is different, so how you teach at one school is different to how you teach at another. It’s one additional barrier to learning”. In addition, the reading and development interventions identified at one school for a child, often gets lost in the transition to another. Here, the Department of Human Services (DHS) can serve as a supportive hub to keep records when children move from one school to another. There is no doubt that family income influences educational outcomes.

To accomplish the goal of every child reading proficiently by third grade in our target communities, a comprehensive approach to early childcare development for children (from birth to eight years of age), their parents and caregivers is needed. One that supports every child with the resources they need to succeed in school. This has been attempted in other neighborhoods in Pittsburgh (Gill, Dembosky & Caulkins, 2002). The challenge is how to do that in our target communities in the face of competing priorities, disconnected, disjointed or duplicated services, deficient early child care, poorly performing schools, unequal access to resources and low expectations. The recommendation highlight the space for MMF to begin: early childhood development and education.

Moving from 25% proficiency (See Figure 4 on p. 12) to 100% cannot be accomplished in a year, or five years. It will be a long-term investment, MMF will need to set realistic expectations and benchmarks and align with numerous stakeholders to develop a program plan for improving student readiness for kindergarten. Then, begin implementation with a proof of concept: a group of parents and infants going through the program to answer the critical questions:

1. Is it working: are the infant/toddlers in our programs meeting critical milestones? E.g. developmental screening and/or evaluation of children from birth to three years can be done through the Early Intervention Office or the Alliance for Infants and Toddlers.

2. Do parents and caregivers want the assistance: one can persuade, recommend and influence, but programs work best when families as the decision makers are open to these levels of supports.
3. Does it fit into MMF’s mission: does MMF have the support, tenacity and innovation to bring these many components and stakeholders together?

With these answers, MMF can then determine how to deliver on scale and quality. Investing in the youngest of children in our target communities by providing a comprehensive, but highly focused and consistent approach, will pay dividends and move the needle forward on this goal.

CONCLUSION

Every day, stakeholders in our target communities are working tirelessly towards the goal of improving third grade reading proficiency. So much has been done, and much more still needs to be accomplished. Stakeholders are excited, encouraged and hopeful for foundations like MMF to take a leading role on this journey.
“We need lasting programs that are sustainable. Too many programs are flash-in-the-pans: start now, gone tomorrow. We need consistency.”

Reverend Glenn G. Grayson, Sr
APPENDIX A: List of Interviewees

EDUCATORS
2. Dr. Margaret Starkes-Ross: Principal of Pittsburgh Miller PreK-5
3. James Doyle: Coordinator of out-of-school time
4. Camara Watkins: Coordinator of Family, Youth and Community Engagement
5. Naomi York-Abdullah: K-5 Curriculum Coordinator
6. Kendra Wester: K-12 Literacy
7. Carol Barone-Martin: Early Childhood Executive Director
8. Lou-Ann Ross: Coordinator, Community Schools
9. Dr. Erika Gold Kestenberg: Associate Director of Educator Development and Practice, Center for Urban Education, University of Pittsburgh
10. Dr. Abiola Farinde-Wu: Visiting Assistant Professor, Ready to Learn Program Manager, Center for Urban Education, University of Pittsburgh

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS
11. Mercedes Williams: Program Manager, Hill District Education Council
12. Princess Hughes: Parent Organizer, Hill District Education Council
13. Cara Ciminillo: Executive Director Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children (PAEYC)
14. Reverend Glenn G. Grayson, Sr: Executive Director, Center that CARES
15. Aaron Gibson: Executive Director, Thelma Lovette YMCA
18. Florri Ladov: Executive Director, Reading is Fundamental (RIF)

MAYOR'S OFFICE
19. LaTrenda Leonard Sherrill: Deputy Chief Operations and Administration:
20. Tiffany Gorman Simoneaux: Early Childhood Manager

FOUNDATIONS
22. Michele Figlar: Vice President for Learning and Program Director of Children, Youth & Families, The Heinz Endowments
REFERENCES


