



**National  
Urban League**



# Mobilizing Communities to Support the Literacy Development of Urban Youth:

## A Conceptual Framework and Strategic Planning Model

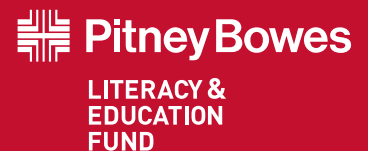
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## Genesis of the Project

The project on which this paper is based was motivated by the widely-recognized need to develop systemic approaches to one of our nation's most serious problems: the fact that large numbers of young people, both those who are enrolled in middle or high school and those who have dropped out or graduated, lack the skills that are critical to their future—the ability to read, write, speak, and think well enough to meet the demands of employment, higher learning, and active citizenship. This problem is particularly acute in urban areas where the majority of our nation's youth attend schools. Turning this trend around will be a significant challenge; one that urban communities feel the urgency to meet. How this challenge can be addressed is not immediately clear, affecting, as it does, not only what happens currently within schools, but addressing the larger societal context within which schooling takes place.

Improving schools is a critical part of the answer. Indeed, many urban youth of color attend schools where they experience teaching and learning that has exacerbated, if not caused, the problem. Helping schools to improve literacy development in grades 4–12 will require involvement and pressure from all sectors. Supporting adolescents to focus upon and develop the literacy habits and skills they need to be successful will require a multi-pronged concerted effort—one that includes schools, families, community organizations, businesses, policymakers, and youth themselves. Those who have tackled related challenges in their communities agree that solutions must focus on leveraging the many assets within these sectors. In this case, it will take engaging, motivating, and supporting multiple stakeholders to simultaneously take action and build upon existing capacities to make literacy development for adolescents a community-wide priority.

In spring 2003, the National Urban League (NUL) was invited to submit a proposal to Carnegie Corporation of New York in the area of adolescent literacy, a priority area for Carnegie. NUL was awarded a 12-month planning grant in July 2003 to develop a Strategic Planning Model for community mobilization around adolescent literacy development that could be implemented in urban communities through the auspices of the local Urban League affiliate, with support from the national office. The planning grant project was directed by Dr. Velma Cobb, Vice President for Education and Youth at the National Urban League.

Based on the recognized expertise of the Center for Resource Management, Inc. (CRM) in the field of adolescent literacy, CRM was invited to participate to provide substantive input, assist in designing and implementing the project, and to prepare written reports. Dr. Julie Meltzer, a Senior Research Associate, and Martha Williams, CRM's Vice President and Director, staffed CRM's work.

The development of the model was guided by a group of high-level advisors who served on a Strategic Planning Group. This group met twice—once in the initial months of the project and again in the latter months to review and refine the strategic planning model and the conceptual framework on which it is based. Members of the Strategic Planning Group represented the fields of adolescent literacy, community mobilization, youth development, parent engagement, and urban school reform. They provided insights, feedback, and examples that substantively shaped this paper. Their names and affiliations are listed below.

Wade Boykin	Director, The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), Howard University
Anthony Colon	Vice President, Center for Community Educational Excellence, National Council of La Raza
Kimberly Gomez	Assistant Professor, Curriculum and Instruction, University of Illinois at Chicago
Richard Gray	Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University
Carol Lee	Associate Professor, Learning Sciences, Northwestern University
Kavitha Mediratta	Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University
Karen Pittman	Director, Forum for Youth Investment
Karen Proctor	Vice-President, Community Affairs and Government Relations, Scholastic, Inc.
Donna Rodriguez	Program Director, Early College High School Initiative, Jobs for the Future

Three Urban League affiliates—Broward County (Fort Lauderdale), Florida; Houston, Texas; and Sacramento, California—hosted site visits and provided input regarding the premises and viability of the model. Along with an extensive review of the literature on several topics, these activities shaped the strategic planning model described here and the conceptual framework on which it is based.

The literature from many relevant fields was extensively reviewed to deepen our understanding, shape our thinking about the most promising directions, and synthesize knowledge in ways that would benefit community leaders. We determined that issue-based strategic planning was the best paradigm for thinking about what communities can do to address literacy support in a *systemic* way to establish “a seamless web of schools, community agencies, and families”—what some are calling a *local education support network* (LESN)—around adolescent literacy support (Rothman, 2004). The questions posed recently by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in this regard are relevant: Are local education support networks, with their potential for linking in- and out-of-school literacy, a viable strategy for helping adolescents develop the ability to read and write well? What needs to happen to ensure they succeed?

We further queried: How could earlier community change efforts shed light on what is needed here? What parts of the community needed to be engaged in what ways? What roles are required? What strategies are viable for schools, and after-school/out-of-school programs to take on? How can communities identify and build upon existing assets and use them to support this effort? How could new capacities, if needed, best be developed to sustain the efforts of others? What community organizations can spearhead such efforts and what kinds of external support would be helpful for them to have? This paper incorporates responses to these questions based on many perspectives, initiatives, and examples.

## The National Urban League and the Campaign for African American Achievement

The National Urban League is the oldest and largest community-based movement dedicated to empowering African Americans to enter the social and economic mainstream. The mission of the Urban League movement is to enable African Americans to secure economic self-reliance, parity and power, and civil rights. Central to achieving this mission is ensuring that our children are well-educated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The academic and social development of young people is a precursor to economic self-sufficiency and inclusion into the American mainstream.

With more than 100 affiliates in 34 states and the District of Columbia, the League serves more than 2 million people annually with more than 700,000 of these under 18 years of age. Given the National Urban League's rich history and tradition, it is uniquely positioned to promote awareness, dialogue, and active engagement on adolescent literacy development in urban communities. The Urban League can be instrumental in holding schools accountable; fostering the development and expansion of supports and opportunities for adolescents of color; and mobilizing the many community assets that can be tapped to create lasting impact.

Education and youth development have historically played a significant role in the mission of the National Urban League and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The National Urban League's motto, "**Empowering Communities: Changing Lives,**" clearly epitomizes our stance. The destiny of our people, our community, and, in fact, this nation depends on all children reaching their greatest potential.

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## Building on Success: The National Urban League's Campaign for African American Achievement

Launched in 1997, the National Urban League's *Campaign for African American Achievement* (CAAA) is a community mobilization and advocacy initiative aimed at educating young people, parents, and the community that "achievement matters," and at rebuilding the infrastructures and supports to ensure quality education. Using data-driven advocacy and mobilization as a vehicle for community change, the Campaign merges public awareness of problems with community engagement to develop solutions. Literacy development is the systems change focus of CAAA because it is the most critical skill for achieving success academically, economically, and socially for African American and other children of color. A major component of the Campaign is *Read and Rise*, a mobilization effort around early literacy support and development in urban areas.

The operational premise of the Campaign is that systemic change—not just change in local programs—requires that all segments of a community work together under a shared vision and set of goals (Connell, 1997). As part of the Campaign, NUL has partnered with more than 20 other national African American organizations whose mission and traditions run deeply in the community. NUL's credibility, infrastructure, and capacity enables the organization to work with these groups in penetrating that segment of the population that is hardest to reach—under-served urban youth of color and their families. The Campaign focuses upon providing the community with current and accurate data and creating opportunities for active engagement.

The overarching strategy of CAAA is to develop, strengthen and/or maintain the structures, supports, and opportunities that enhance achievement. CAAA accomplishes its work through three main arenas:

- *Awareness and Education*—by "spreading the gospel that achievement matters," transforming parents into sophisticated consumers, and providing information and data on education and youth development issues that relate to quality education.
- *Advocacy and Mobilization*—by creating consumer demand for quality education and by mobilizing families, communities, and youth-serving agencies and organizations to act on behalf of young people locally and nationally.
- *Policy and Research*—by building alliances that influence policies which affect the lives of children and youth.

The Campaign achieved many notable successes for individuals, organizations, and communities, and these remain as valuable assets upon which to build. Important lessons have been learned that can inform new initiatives, thus ensuring a lasting impact.

*Leaders on both sides of the political aisle have declared illiteracy a national emergency that needs urgent attention. An abundance of scientific research over the past ten years has helped us understand why the problem of illiteracy exists. Yet whether we're moving toward real change is far from certain.*

Mithers, 2001

## The Scope of the Crisis

Many agree that the United States is in the midst of a literacy crisis. A wide range of measures reveal disastrously low adult and adolescent literacy levels—too many adults and adolescents in our country cannot read and write well enough to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century work, education, and life requirements. If not addressed, the effects of this crisis threaten the economic, social, and political viability of our nation for decades to come.

Results from the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test reveal that more than 8 million children in America in grades 4 through 12 read at “below basic” levels. An estimated 800,000 12<sup>th</sup> graders (28%) scored below the “basic” level, meaning they could not demonstrate an overall understanding and make some interpretation of texts they were asked to read. A majority of high school students lack the ability to reason with text, infer meaning, or read critically, which is key to achieving high levels of learning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004).

The much-discussed “achievement gap” that separates poor students and students of color from their white and affluent peers was narrowing up until 1988, but has since increased (Haycock 2001; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). In the United States, minority students currently have only a 50% chance of earning a high school diploma (Swanson, 2003). Based on an analysis of the NAEP data, the Education Trust concluded that, “by the time they reach grade 12, if they do so at all, minority students are about four years behind other young people. Indeed, 17-year-old African American and Latino students have skills in English, mathematics, and science similar to those of 13-year-old white students” (Education Trust, 2004).

When they leave high school, only one of 50 Latinos and one of 100 African American 17-year old students can read and gain information from specialized text (such as the science section in the newspaper), compared to about one of 12 whites. Fewer than one-quarter of Latinos and one-fifth of African Americans can read the complicated, but less specialized text that more than half of white students can read (Haycock, 2001). The gap is apparent by the time students reach the upper elementary grades. For example, in 2003, 39% of white students scored at the proficient level or higher on the 4th grade NAEP reading assessment; only 12% of African American students and 14% of Latino students did so (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Poor literacy instruction hurts youth of color, English Language Learners (ELLs), and students with learning and developmental disabilities most severely. However, the cumulative effect of poor instruction clearly affects the overall student population, as only a minority of learners, regardless of race or ethnicity, is performing at high levels (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999). Although there are many students of color who regularly outperform the majority of white students, the fact remains that far too few students of color are being served well by the educational system at present. If we believe that these tests measure critical skills that we want high school graduates to have, then the need for intensive action is urgent.

Predictions are that by 2020, students from “minority” groups will form the majority of the population in American schools. In more than 20 urban school districts across the country, they already do (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1997). This includes large numbers of native and non-native students whose home language is different from the academic English used at school. Unprecedented numbers of ELLs, many with limited academic literacy skills in their native language, are enrolling in secondary schools throughout the United States, including regions that have not previously seen large influxes of immigrants (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2004; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2001). In October 2002, the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) estimated that there were 1,146,154 limited-English-proficient students attending grades 7–12 in U.S. public schools (excluding Puerto Rico and other outlying jurisdictions). This represents 5.6% of all public secondary enrollment and 29.3% of the total K–12 ELL enrollment in public schools (Kindler, 2002). The number of teachers who have ELLs in their classes is rapidly increasing, with almost 43% of all teachers having at least one ELL in their classes, and most urban middle and high school teachers having far more than that, often from diverse language groups.

The bottom line is that focused attention to academic literacy development in grades 4–12 for students who are struggling readers, “average” readers, or ELLs is critical for those students to be academically successful and independent lifelong learners. The issue is most urgent for urban communities, because disproportionate numbers of students in these categories are urban youth of color, attending under-resourced schools that are often least equipped to deal with the multiple challenges facing them.

*Accelerating technological change, rapidly accumulating knowledge, increasing global competition, and rising workforce capabilities around the world make 21<sup>st</sup> century skills essential.*

Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2003

For those who seek to tackle the issue of adolescent literacy development, it is important to understand, first, why basic reading skills are not enough, and second, how literacy connects to learning across all content areas.

Our increasingly complex, technological, and information-driven world requires far more sophisticated literacy skills than did the agrarian and industrial economies on which our public education system was based. While basic levels of proficiency in the “3 R’s” was adequate for most people to succeed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, basic reading and writing skills are not enough to succeed in today’s world. Judith Langer terms what is needed now as “high literacy”:

*While basic reading and writing skills are included in this definition of high literacy, also included is the ability to use language, content, and reasoning in ways that are appropriate for particular situations and disciplines. Students learn to “read” the social meanings, the rules and structures and the linguistic and cognitive routines to make things work in the real world of English language use, and that knowledge becomes available as options when students confront new situations. This notion of high literacy refers to understanding how reading, writing, language, content, and social appropriateness work together and using this knowledge in effective ways. It is reflected in students’ ability to engage in thoughtful reading, writing, and discussion about content in the classroom, to put their knowledge and skills to use in new situations, and to perform well on reading and writing assignments including high stakes testing.*

Langer, 1999

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The standards-based education reform movement highlights the need for literacy skills and habits that are well beyond those required to succeed in school in the past. “High stakes” assessments, increasingly required for promotion and graduation, require students to read complex texts, apply or interpret what they have read, and respond in writing to explain their analyses or show how they arrived at solutions. These requirements extend beyond the requirements of the English language arts curriculum to all content areas. “*Disciplinary literacy*—the ability to understand, critique and use knowledge from texts in the content areas—is the primary conduit through which learning in the academic disciplines takes place” (Lee, 2004).

Beyond school, the literacy demands of all professions and specializations also require specific literacies, but the literacy skills of large numbers of American workers are insufficient to meet the increasingly strenuous reading, writing, speaking, and thinking demands of available jobs—including “blue collar” jobs in the technical, service, and manufacturing sectors. A large percentage of adolescents and adults who are seeking to enter the workforce, retrain for new careers due to a changing economy, or pursue higher education, find that poor literacy skills severely limit their options (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999).

Regardless of race or ethnicity, many of those going on to higher education—including those regarded as “good in school”—are not well prepared. Remedial and developmental reading and writing instruction are being offered at more colleges and universities and more students are assigned to take these courses than ever before. Students are enrolling in higher education in greater numbers, but poor students and students of color drop out in disproportionate numbers, largely due to their inability to comprehend complex texts or adequately communicate their understanding through writing and speaking using assigned academic formats.

The academic literacy development of adolescents requires synergistic attention to reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking. This is because “reading” is much more than just decoding and fluency—although these are certainly key. And, while reading is typically regarded as the most important literacy skill, improving reading comprehension beyond the basic level depends on the ability to write critically, think analytically, and communicate orally. In other words, there is no meaningful way to support improved reading comprehension for diverse learners without strengthening these other literacy skills. Simultaneously, weak skills in these other areas leave students substantially at risk.

Adolescents who are still struggling with the basic skills of decoding and fluency must have access to diagnostic evaluation and strategic interventions that build phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition and attack skills. These skills are key to developing their ability to read connected text fluently enough that meaning can be negotiated. Poor basic skills block the reading development of between 2 and 10% of students nationally—with a greater concentration of those students in urban areas (Curtis, 2002).

There is research on the efficacy of particular interventions focused on these areas (e.g., Peterson, Caverly, Nicholson, O’Neal, & Cusenbary, 2000; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). However, attention to these most basic reading skills, while necessary, is not sufficient. There are many students who can “read” the words but do not understand what they read. Supporting a focus

on reading *comprehension* is critical. There are many others who can read and get the gist of what they read, but whose limited vocabulary, background knowledge, or understanding of text structures contribute to confusion and inability to use text effectively to learn in any context, whether print or electronic forms.

Reading levels are not consistent either. A student who has had better instruction in certain types of reading (e.g., fiction versus non-fiction) or who is interested in certain topics (e.g., cars, disease, biographies of famous people) may be able to read certain types of texts much more fluently than others. A more challenging text related to something with which students are familiar, can often be read with more understanding than one that is easier but about something more foreign to their experience. Students need help to strategically read the various types of texts they are assigned, and to make connections with their existing knowledge.

Literacy development is a continuum, and the “ongoing literacy development of adolescents is just as critical and will require just as much attention, as that of beginning readers” if we expect them to engage in learning tasks that involve higher order thinking skills across the content areas (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999). At the middle school and high school levels, reading comprehension skills must become increasingly sophisticated to address the demands posed by more challenging academic expectations. “Beyond the primary grades, students need to grapple with texts that are expository, dense, and full of new, more difficult vocabulary, especially in math, science and social studies” (Allen, 2000). The ability to transact meaning with such text is often not directly taught. If these skills are not fluent due to lack of practice, and not continually scaffolded to improve with time, all but the most advanced readers and writers are placed at a disadvantage (Meltzer, 2002). Therefore, it is important that adolescent literacy support and development efforts focus on helping youth gain the level of academic literacy that will lead to life-long self-directed learning and competence in college, the workplace, and beyond.

### The Economic, Political, and Social Imperatives of Literacy Development

*Never before has the success, perhaps even the survival, of nations and people been so tightly tied to their ability to learn.*

Darling-Hammond, 1997

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For most youth with poor academic literacy skills, daily life presents obstacles to success on many fronts: developing marketable skills, getting and keeping a good job, and navigating our increasingly complex and knowledge-dependent society. Indeed, the negative impact is far-reaching and continues throughout adulthood. In this global economy, the ability to learn; to identify, synthesize, and use information; to work with others; and to pose as well as solve problems, often defines ones’ ability to be successful.

Urban youth are disproportionately affected by poor academic literacy habits and skills. Population density coupled with fewer jobs means that competition for the jobs that do exist is greater, favoring those with higher literacy skills and high school diplomas. This leaves too many youth of color from poor urban areas unemployed and unemployable. Their schools are often less effective at serving their needs, leaving them less prepared than others who will compete for the same work and higher education opportunities. Lastly, the “aliteracy” of many youth—the choice to read rarely even if one can—is particularly evident in the inner cities and in rural areas of our country where the culture of school does not effectively match, bridge, or build upon the “literate currencies” (e.g., Obidah, 1998) and cultural strengths that students from diverse backgrounds bring to school. Many of these students choose to drop out of school for a wide variety of reasons, including the cumulative effects of poor teaching that leave many middle and high school students, through no fault of their own, far behind. At that point, without effective and proactive intervention and support both in and out of school, many have little hope of succeeding in the mainstream.

The negative impact of inadequate literacy habits and skills extends far beyond the individual adolescent. Literacy, or the lack of it, is a strong predictor of economic success, employment, and even imprisonment. Workers with higher literacy scores are unemployed less and earn more than workers with lower literacy scores. Unemployment rates are especially high for workers in the lowest levels of literacy—nearly 20%—compared with less than 6% for workers with high levels of literacy (Sum, 1992). People who have experienced academic failure and have inadequate literacy levels fall prey, at alarming rates, to serious community problems associated with poverty such as crime, pervasive health issues, and low levels of civic participation. The economic impact is compounded when employers who depend on workers who can read, listen, speak, write, and think critically can’t find literate workers—the result can be the loss of jobs due to employer relocation or business failure.

In her book, *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage*, Lisbeth Schorr (1988) refers to “the high cost of rotten outcomes.” Among the most pernicious of these outcomes is crime and incarceration. “High school dropouts are three and half times more likely to be arrested than graduates . . . [and] most incarcerated youth lag two or more years behind their peers in basic academic skills and have high rates of grade retention, absenteeism, suspension, and expulsion. More than one-third of all juvenile offenders (mean age 15.5 years) read below the fourth grade level” (Allen, Almeida, & Steinberg, 2004). And, the impact expands geometrically over time, as succeeding generations of young adults with poor literacy skills have children whose success in school they are ill-equipped to support.

## The Impact of Chronic Failure on Youth

Overcoming years of failure in school is indeed daunting. By high school, many low-achieving students have developed negative attitudes and behaviors. Failure breeds low self-esteem, hopelessness, alienation from school and other institutional supports, and depression. Frustration with failed attempts to perform learning tasks all too often leads to anti-social and self-destructive behavior, including absence, truancy, discipline problems, drug use, crime, and violence. Many dropouts report that the combination of these factors was insurmountable, and that no adult in the school seemed to care. When caring educators attempt to intervene, their efforts are often too little and too late to turn the situation around.

Explicit and implicit social and cultural attitudes that regard academic reading and writing as not important, or not “cool” also undermine some students’ abilities to persist with the challenge of developing academic literacy habits and skills. Many students face harassment and powerful pressure from peers to show disdain for school and achievement.

Some young people come to middle and high school liking to read and/or write, but they fail to thrive in content-area classrooms, where their inadequate literacy habits and skills mean that they do not have the capacity to do academic reading and writing at the levels demanded. Low expectations on the part of adults and other educators based on early failure exacerbate the problem and foster the vicious cycle of “can’t, don’t, and won’t.” Even students entering middle schools and high schools reading at grade level often make less than a year’s progress in reading while there, setting them up to fall farther and farther behind.

Many children of the information age, including those who are technologically literate, are often illiterate—they choose not to read, valuing both personal and academic reading and writing far less than television, computers, video games, handheld communication devices, music, “hanging out” with friends, participating in recreational activities, and so on. Though these activities often have literacy components in which students are fluently engaged, school does little to help them transfer these literacy skills and strategies to learning from content-area texts. Others engage in substantive personal reading and/or writing but choose not to develop or engage with academic literacy tasks, again resulting in limited academic literacy skills (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Some students openly resist reading and writing forms that do not seem useful or relevant to them, or that seem to threaten their identity by not valuing the knowledge and literacies that they do bring to school. Breaking down these barriers to motivate students to willfully engage in academic literacy tasks depends on those tasks being meaningful, authentic, and sufficiently scaffolded with reading and writing instruction to support student success (Alvermann, 2003).

Those adolescents who have dropped out, or who attend school only sporadically, are beyond the reach of even highly talented educators. Yet it is increasingly obvious that the best efforts of teachers, administrators, specialists, and other educators, without additional training and family and community support, cannot address the literacy crisis alone, even for those students who stay in school.

## The Role of Secondary Education in the Literacy Crisis

Public schools have the primary responsibility for preparing our youth for adult roles, and throughout the past several decades, they have been the focus of myriad improvement efforts sponsored by national, state, and local organizations and through legislation—most recently the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Though early reading was a priority focus in the legislation, adolescent literacy was not addressed until the re-authorization of 2004. Despite these efforts, reforming secondary education to ensure that all students achieve high standards has proven particularly challenging for a number of reasons: typical approaches to teaching reading at the secondary level, the skills and orientations of secondary teachers, insufficient professional development, the structure of traditional high schools, and inadequate funding. The failure to meet the challenge of literacy development represents a major barrier to achieving the goal of education reform (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Haycock, 2001).

**Typical Approaches to Teaching Reading at the Secondary Level.** Historically, the focus on reading at the secondary level has been remedial in nature. That is, there are special classes in reading for those who did not learn to read in elementary school. This limited view of reading was part of the problem, since we now know that those students who needed support to learn to read in elementary school will likely need continued support to learn to read the increasingly complex and varied texts expected in the upper grades. In addition, in recent decades, secondary remedial reading classes were increasingly rare, so the amount of help being offered was grossly inadequate over a sustained period of time (Peterson, Caverly, Nicholson, O’Neal, & Cusenbary, 2000). During this same period, elementary schools were swinging between phonics-based and whole-language approaches to reading instruction. This meant that students who learned better with one of these approaches may not have had an equal opportunity to learn to read. The lack of what is now recognized as “balanced reading instruction” means that many students, no matter which approach was used, do not reach the end of third grade (a critical marker) reading on grade level. Already behind, the majority of these students move on to middle schools that are ill-equipped to accelerate their literacy habits and skills. In far too many cases, students are virtually ignored and left to learn what they can on their own (Zehler, Fleishman, Hopstock, & Stephenson, 2003). The result is large numbers of graduates who have sufficient credits to graduate (based on “seat time” and/or weak grading criteria), but do not have basic, much less adequate, literacy habits and skills.

**The Skills and Orientations of Secondary Teachers.** Vast numbers of our urban middle and high schools are staffed to some extent by inexperienced, poorly trained, and uncredentialed teachers; conditions that are exacerbated by high teacher turnover, teacher shortages, limited professional development, and inadequate instructional resources; and far too few trained reading specialists. Even when they want to, many teachers simply do not know how to address the widely diverse literacy skill levels of their students. Further, many middle and high school teachers do not consider teaching reading as “part of their job,” acquiescing to the prevailing belief that elementary teachers are solely responsible for teaching reading, and that if students enter middle schools without adequate literacy skills, it is either the fault of the elementary school or the student’s inability to learn.

Because secondary teachers are unable or unwilling to teach reading, many “enable” kids not to read (Allen, 2000; Cziko, 1998). This sets students up to be highly dependent on teachers to “feed” them content in other ways (films, lecture) and defeats the goal of helping students become independent lifelong learners. Thus, instead of receiving support and practice opportunities needed to strengthen skills, struggling readers may actually read and write less than good readers during grades 4–12.

**Insufficient Professional Development.** Few teachers have had sufficient, high-quality professional development to prepare them to address the literacy needs of struggling readers and writers, let alone to develop the high literacy needed to understand complex subject matter content. Historically, the role of middle and high school teachers has been to teach subject matter content (e.g., history, science). The pressures of preparing students to pass subject matter portions of state examinations reinforce this priority. At the policy level, more than 30 states do not require a course in content-area reading for secondary school teachers. Hence, many teachers take the position that literacy instruction for struggling adolescent readers is a complex undertaking for which they have not been prepared. Although numerous research-based instructional practices have been developed, they have not been widely disseminated and teachers have not had adequate preparation in using them. Even with willing teachers, professional development resources in most secondary schools are tremendously strained, and most teacher professional development 1) is not well designed, 2) occurs sporadically with little follow up, and 3) does not typically result in meaningful changes in classroom practice.

Despite years of reform initiatives and extensive research literature on effective instruction, most secondary classrooms are characterized by “drill and kill” teaching, lecturing, and assignments that do little to help students “uncover” the essential ideas and concepts of their subjects. Few teachers have the ability to capitalize on the multiple literacies that students bring to school and to build on these to develop academic literacy habits and skills, especially in instances when the backgrounds of students differ from their own (Obidah, 1998; Walqui, 2000). And, teaching is a highly isolated—and isolating—profession. As one 25-year veteran of high school teaching puts it, “I have taught 20,000 classes; I have been ‘evaluated’ thirty times; but I have never seen another teacher teach” (Darling-Hammond, 2001).

**The Structure of Traditional High Schools.** Traditional high school schedules and structures—45–50 minute periods, large classes, teacher schedules that preclude time to help struggling students, and limited collaboration among teachers who teach the same students—do not lend themselves to well-coordinated instruction across subject areas. This makes it difficult for teachers to provide intense, sustained, and focused instruction across the school day. Ability grouping practices in many middle and high schools, ostensibly put into place to meet student needs, mean, in practice, that students in low tracks typically receive less effective instruction and are held to lower expectations. Few struggling readers get the kind and quantity of help needed to become strategic readers. Still fewer experience the sort of participatory approaches (Alvermann, 2003, 2004), arts-infused or inquiry-based units (Wilhelm, Baker & Dube, 2001; Wilhelm, 1995; the Arts Literacy Project), purposeful building upon the literacy currencies that adolescents bring to school (Obidah, 1998), or the use of cultural modeling and cultural data sets (Lee, 2004) described by the literature as effective in helping struggling or aliterate readers to engage with their own academic literacy development.

For many students, frustration with school, their lack of success, and feeling alienated trigger anti-social behavior and absence. In her recent book, *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools That Work*, noted educational researcher Linda Darling-Hammond writes that “many well-known adolescent difficulties are not intrinsic to the teenage years but are related to the mismatch between adolescents’ developmental needs and the kinds of experiences most junior high and high schools provide. When students need close affiliation, they experience large depersonalized schools; when they need to develop autonomy, they experience few opportunities for choice and punitive approaches to discipline; when they need expansive cognitive challenges and opportunities to demonstrate their competence, they experience work focused largely on the memorization of facts; when they need to build self-confidence and a healthy identity, they experience tracking that explicitly labels many of them as academically deficient.” (2001). Noted literacy researcher, Donna Alvermann, questions: “Adolescent aliteracy—are schools causing it?” (Alvermann, 2004, p. 26).

**Inadequate Education Funding.** To date, public funding has been woefully inadequate to address these conditions. At the federal level, the Title 1 program is the chief source of funding for reading support. But in 2004, only 17% of Title 1 funding went to middle schools and 5% went to high schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). State and local resources have been severely strained, and many states and communities have experienced severe budget cuts for education. More attention and resources must be directed toward the identification of students who require assistance; toward the development of engaging and effective pedagogy for students of diverse backgrounds and those who have been “turned off” by school; and toward ensuring that we do not leave so many “behind.”

## Enhancing Academic Literacy Development at the Secondary Level: What the Research Literature Tells Us

Better understanding of how to support literacy development in middle and high schools has become a major issue in the current standards-based reform, as the lack of academic literacy skills is recognized as a major barrier to achieving the goals of reform (e.g., Joftus, 2002; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Existing research suggests that teaching reading comprehension as a content-area learning strategy is a promising approach to enhancing adolescents' abilities to use reading and writing to learn content. A growing body of research about the differences in the metacognitive skills of good versus poor readers is providing a foundation for identifying promising reading comprehension strategies for adolescent learners (e.g., Curtis, 2002; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, 2002; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Rosenshine, Meister & Chapman, 1996). Adolescent students "must learn to think about the complexities of the reading process and then

actively apply appropriate strategies" (Allen, 2000). They must therefore learn the literacy strategies, be given time to practice and apply them to a variety of contexts, and subsequently use them for learning in the content areas.

However, the literacy demands of different content areas, while sharing some similarities, also vary substantially (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995). For example, the key concepts and vocabulary of different disciplines differ, and knowing what the relevant vocabulary means is important because vocabulary is directly linked to reading comprehension. The essence of good vocabulary instruction is creating contexts where students use relevant and key vocabulary constantly in their reading, writing, and speaking—in contrast to the far more prevalent "assign, define, and test" strategy used by most secondary teachers. Several educational researchers see direct vocabulary instruction as a critical strategy for closing the achievement gap (e.g., Marzano, 2003). Therefore, explicit attention to vocabulary development is critical within the context of content-focused classrooms in urban secondary schools.

8 Because text structures and discourses also vary by discipline, "teachers need to teach the 'decoding' of discipline-specific text structures (e.g., memoir, interview transcript, math word problem, scientific journal abstract, marketing plan) and text features (e.g., bold or italicized print, graphics, indices, chapter headings, glossaries, hyperlinks, chapter summaries, change in point of view, bibliographies). Demystifying the expository and narrative text structures specific to content areas can provide readers with frames of reference to use when interpreting new information" (Meltzer, 2002, p. 63). The meaning of the same vocabulary words can differ across the content areas as well (e.g., evidence, discussion, power, problem solving, graphic, conclusion, argument) and contribute to confusion if not explicitly taught within the context of the discourse of each discipline. The conventions of academic discourse (e.g., debate, historical re-enactment, presentation of a geometric proof, scientific hypotheses) also vary across content areas. Lastly, when reading, writing, or speaking in a content area, one needs to know aspects of discourse (e.g., the criteria for documentation, format, and approaches to analysis). Being able to recognize and analyze discourse aids tremendously in content-area understanding and content-focused writing (e.g., Langer & Flihan, 2000; Schoenbach et al., 1999). The explicit teaching of the discourse features particular to specific content areas is especially important for English Language Learners and those coming from literacy backgrounds where dialects of English other than "standard" English are spoken (Mohan, 1990; Reyhner & Davison, 1992; Spanos, 1992).

Another area of the research on adolescent literacy concerns student motivation to read and write (Alvermann, 2001, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Kamil, 2003).

*When students are not motivated to read and write, they do not use those skills to learn. As a consequence of not practicing their reading and writing skills, students do not attain an adequate skill level necessary for sustaining higher-order thinking. This often leads to a cycle of failure. Moreover, when students do not feel comfortable with the identity of being a reader and writer and do not see the relevance of reading and writing to their success in society, they will not incorporate being a reader and writer into their personal identities.*

Meltzer, 2002

Grady (2002) and others note that a number of reading researchers and theorists believe that the reading process includes not only the cognitive dimension addressed by schema theory and many existing reading strategies, but a social dimension as well (e.g., Bloome, 1986; Goodman, 1996; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, Mueller, 2001; Harste & Woodward, 1994). The extent to which readers are able to construct meaning from text is not only a function of their cognitive skills, but the personal, interpersonal, and institutional contexts in which reading events occur. The work of socio-linguists, cultural anthropologists, and critical theorists has shown that it is not possible to separate classroom practices, such as strategies for note taking, from the larger social and cultural contexts in which the practices are enacted (e.g., Heath, 1983; Gee, 1996).

Based on their review of a number of research studies, Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) stress the importance of adolescents' literacy practices beyond the secondary classroom to venues such as the Internet, television, and magazines, and of the relationship between literacy and the development of identity. Literacy development depends on many factors: how students perceive themselves as readers; what their interests are at the time; the interactions of teacher and student, of

student and student, the classroom environment in which the strategy is being used, and how institutional structures shape daily events that occur in classrooms and schools. Recognizing these complexities regarding literacy and learning requires new strategies for developing students' academic literacies (Brynlidssen, 2001).

Poor academic performance may be a reflection of limited skills, poor instruction, limited opportunity to learn, disengagement, low task value, or refusal to try. In most cases, regarding poor school performance as a reflection of an inability to learn or illiteracy is not warranted or productive. Many students—even those who are unwilling to engage in academic literacy habits and skills and whose performance on tests is poor—bring a wide range of literacy skills to bear on their work-centered, home, recreational, or faith-based activities. These include journal writing, using a computer, playing video games, filling out order forms, listening to music and discussing song lyrics, or reading the Bible. Youth engagement with multiple literacies, many of which exist only outside of school (e.g., hip hop music, instant messaging, media literacy, consumer literacy, poetry slams) or exist inside and outside of school in competing forms (e.g., technological literacy, cultural literacy) has been studied by many (e.g., Alvermann, 2001, 2003; Lee, 2001; Moje, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). These same adolescents “demonstrate expertise in navigating literacy tasks that are personally meaningful and that yield results that are useful to them” (Alvermann, 2004, p.31). In developing strategies to support struggling readers, these literacy assets must be considered and actively built upon.

This “hidden cache” of literacies that enables adolescents to function in peer, work, community, or family venues in competent ways may not be visible or transferable in school contexts that are disconnected or perceived as irrelevant, or that disparage students who do not engage academically. Teachers' use of pedagogies that bridge in-school and out-of-school literacies and use students' knowledge in other areas to assist them in developing academic literacy is rare (e.g., Alvermann, 2004; Ball, 1998; Lee, 2004; Obidah, 1998; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The risks that these students must take—the risk of identifying oneself as a learner, the risk of failure, and the risk of success followed by little pay-off—are significant. Therefore, labeling them as “struggling” or “low-performing” runs counter to efforts to convince students who currently do not perform well on these tests that academic literacy development is a desirable and worthwhile goal and that they will get the support they need to succeed.

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Hence, motivation and engagement emerge in the literature as key issues related to the academic literacy development of adolescents (Alvermann, 2001; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kamil, 2003; Peterson, Caverly, Nicholson, O'Neal, & Cusenbary, 2000). Alvermann (2001) sums it up this way:

*Adolescents' perceptions of how competent they are as readers and writers, generally speaking, will affect how motivated they are to learn in their subject area classes (e.g., the sciences, social studies, mathematics and literature). Thus, if academic literacy instruction is to be effective, it must address issues of self-efficacy and engagement.*

Alvermann, 2001

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Self-efficacy is strongly related to motivation; that is, the more competent one feels to address a specific task, the more likely one will attempt to complete or engage with that task. This applies to reading and writing just as it does to anything else (Alvermann, 2003; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). And, of course, the opposite is also true. Therefore, learning strategies that improve reading comprehension can be, in themselves, motivating and can lead to students wanting to engage more enthusiastically in reading and writing tasks that develop deeper content area understanding. However, Kamil and others stress, “Motivation and engagement are critical for adolescent readers. If students are not motivated to read, research shows that they will simply not benefit from reading instruction” (Kamil, 2003, p.8). In other words, adolescents will only take on the task of learning how to read better (or write better) if they have a sufficiently compelling reason for doing so.

Adolescent motivation, in general, is highly variable and is often dependent upon purpose and context, including relationships with peers and instructors. This highlights the importance of creating classrooms that focus on student engagement as a key strategy for assisting students to develop positive literacy identities and strengthened literacy skills, since the level of engagement over time is the vehicle through which classroom instruction mediates student outcomes (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Therefore, the classroom context within which instruction of a strategy takes place can be as important as the instruction itself.

Classroom cultures that optimally support literacy development through successfully motivating students to read and write can be characterized by *connections*, *responsiveness*, and *interaction*. These, in turn, work synergistically to support increased student engagement and reflection (Collins, 1996; Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1993; Lee, 2004; Krogness, 1995; Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000; Oldfather, 1994; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Swan, 2004; Wilhelm, 1995). Students' engagement with academic literacy tasks allows them to develop competence through the learning and use of strategies, which then leads to improved academic literacy habits and skills (Guthrie, 2001; Guthrie et al., 1998; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Swan 2004).

The adolescent literacy research in this area can be summarized as follows: classrooms in which students are inspired to read and write provide learning environments where students feel a sense of belonging, competence, respect, and

trust to make choices (Alvermann, 2001, 2003; Collins, 1996; Ivey & Broaddus 2001; McCombs & Barton, 1998). Such environments allow for: 1) the formation of meaningful adult and peer relationships, which include providing specific and useful feedback in a supportive way; 2) dialogue, collaboration, and the expression of personal views; and 3) acknowledgment, respect, and support for unique abilities and talents, choice, and autonomy (Ball & Farr, 2003; Dillon, 1989; McCombs & Barton, 1998; Obidah, 1998; Reed, Schallert, Beth & Woodruff, 2004; Ruddell & Unrau, 1996; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Swan, 2004). To support literacy development in such a classroom—whether it is a mathematics classroom, a social studies classroom, or a language arts classroom—teachers need to know their students, how to teach reading and writing, and how to optimize the social and motivational needs of adolescents in service of content-area learning (Ball, 1998; Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1993; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Lee, 2004; McCombs & Barton, 1998; Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000; Reed et al., 2004; Tierney & Pearson, 1981, 1992). Although the strategies for building literacy among struggling readers are numerous, they are impotent if the young person is not motivated to improve and to sustain the effort to do so. Employing effective strategies to promote student motivation and engagement to read and write, then, must be a focus of schools, parents, and communities.

There is increasing evidence that a school-wide approach results in enhanced literacy skills for K–3 learners, and recent studies suggest that successful secondary initiatives would require a similar school-wide focus, rather than applying strategies in a piecemeal fashion (Allen, 2000). An extensive review of the literature led to the development of the *Adolescent Literacy Support Framework* (Meltzer, 2001). Supporting the literacy development of adolescents within secondary schools in this era of standards-based reform will require attention to four key areas: 1) purposeful use of research-grounded literacy support strategies used in all classrooms; 2) attention and explicit teaching of the literacy demands of various content areas (vocabulary, text structures, and discourses—e.g., how to read history, write scientific reports, present the solution to a math problem); 3) a focus on student motivation and engagement to read and write; and 4) the organizational structures and leadership capacities required to sustain and enact these systemically. The framework can be used by parents, educators, and community members to focus attention on how resources should best be used to build adolescents' academic literacy habits and skills.

The genome of literacy development is being mapped, and promising strategies are being identified, applied, refined, and expanded with greater frequency every day. There is still much to be learned, but much is already known. It is important to acknowledge that the problem is not the child—we know how to teach reading to most, if not all, types of learners. The question is whether or not we have the will to do so.

Bolstered by the growing understanding that literacy skills are the gateway to learning and achievement—and the fact that the high stakes assessments mandated by NCLB require strong literacy skills—educators and policy makers at all levels have made literacy development a high priority. While federal funds for literacy development were initially targeted toward early reading and elementary-level programs, the current federal budget includes \$24.8 thousand to support the Striving Readers Program. Funding from the federal government and private foundations, such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, W. G. Kellogg Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, support research, model program development, knowledge dissemination vehicles, teacher professional development, in-school and out-of-school tutoring, and supplemental programs focused on literacy development of those in grades 4–12 (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Still, resources and initiatives from outside the community are inadequate to create and sustain the types of systemic changes that are needed. Multiple sectors of communities themselves must be engaged with the issue and mobilized to act in cohesive and collaborative ways. Armed with this knowledge base, communities—parents, schools, community organizations and institutions, and youth themselves—can create consumer demand for quality literacy development and support, and assist schools to conduct a needs assessment to determine where more support and attention is necessary.

It's hard to imagine a constituency in any community that does not have a stake in literacy development for adolescents. Parents want their children to succeed and be able to explore multiple options. Employers want workers who have solid reading comprehension and communication skills that they can apply to on-the-job learning and performance. Policy makers and elected officials want voters who are able to read to understand complex issues. Health and human service agencies want people to be able to successfully navigate the complexities of the system to get what they need. Community members want safe neighborhoods where youth are productively engaged. Educators want to be successful at their core mission. These values and desires are important community assets that can be mobilized to turn the literacy crisis—and the lives of countless adolescents—around.

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*Overcoming the continued academic underperformance of students of color requires a systemic approach—one that combines simultaneous interventions by families, teachers and administrators, and the larger society.*

National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability

## Why “Community Mobilization?”

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*Communities will need mobilization efforts to create conditions that encourage ALL stakeholders to launch and sustain implementation of the community strategies for adolescent literacy.*

Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000

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*With a combination of informed leadership and vigorous grass-roots organizing, communities can be mobilized to engage in a strategic planning process on behalf of adolescents and their families.*

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995

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Lacking a solid mobilization effort, common interests cannot be pursued in a collaborative, synergistic way (Academy for Educational Development & Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2003). Community mobilization is a proven strategy for addressing complex problems that can't be solved by short term, isolated interventions (Health Communication Partnership, 2002). Although similar in purpose to *community engagement* and *community involvement*, the term *mobilization* implies a proactive role for multiple community constituencies. Mobilization seeks to create a dynamic, synergistic, multi-constituency, and sustained effort based on a shared commitment and sense of urgency about the goal. It builds from awareness and ownership to political will, action, and accountability.

*Community mobilization involves the joining of public awareness with public engagement of stakeholders. It is an ongoing process of problem-solving to develop visions, goals, and strategies to achieve those goals. Their focus is on systems, not just programs. They take a holistic big picture view of what is needed, assess needs, implement action, assess results, re-evaluate their strategies, implement action—and the cycle continues.*

Families and Work Institute (see Dombro), 1996

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The Harvard Family Research Project underscores the importance of a systemic approach to addressing social needs:

*Many traditional government programs designed to remedy disadvantage . . . focus on individuals without regard to the communities or the families in which they live. In contrast to this piecemeal approach, the practice of comprehensive community development builds on the idea that neighborhoods are like ecosystems, interconnected so that the health of each part depends on the well-being of the whole.*

Lund, 1997

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The term *comprehensive community initiative* (CCI) is increasingly used to describe such systemic efforts, which have three defining characteristics:

- They aim to promote positive change in individual, family, and neighborhood circumstances.
- They work to improve physical, economic, and social conditions at the neighborhood level.
- They place strong emphasis on community building and neighborhood empowerment.

Aspen Institute, 1997

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CCIs take advantage of the research base on programming and interventions and recognize the complexity and the conditions in which families and children live. Rather than argue for a single programmatic approach, the focus is to develop new systems that will allow communities to develop the capacity to build and enhance the necessary structures and supports that will nurture and promote positive change in individuals, families, and community environments.

One of the key elements of the current form of CCIs is community mobilization. In contrast to the form of community mobilization that involves a collective call for action or the organization of local residents around a specific issue, this approach requires long-term strategic planning and innovative action plans that are collaboratively developed and implemented. Although many of the traditional community mobilization strategies (e.g., public awareness campaigns, rallies, etc.) play critical roles in the process, this approach also requires local stakeholders to create and carry out an overall agenda for change. This agenda incorporates:

- A shared vision and a common set of goals and objectives
- A commitment to long-range strategic planning
- Action plans based on assessments of local strengths and needs
- Viable implementation strategies
- Restructuring local resources

The authors of this paper, together with the Strategic Planning Group, placed these concepts at the core of their collaborative design of a community mobilization model for supporting adolescent literacy development. The Strategic Planning Model presented here has two major components: a Conceptual Framework and an Implementation Model. The Conceptual Framework describes the foundation elements of the model—the literacy goal; the community assets and sectors that need to be mobilized; key leverage points for stimulating action; strategies for increasing literacy development and support; and outcomes for adolescents, organizations, and communities. The Implementation Model includes recommendations for the infrastructure needed to launch, implement, and sustain the effort and provides guidelines for community mobilization for literacy development and support.

### Defining the Literacy Goal

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The ultimate goal of a community-wide adolescent literacy initiative is to enable and support adolescents to strengthen their academic literacy habits and skills related to academic disciplines and contexts. With this in mind, the Strategic Planning Group developed a definition of *literate adolescents*:

*Literate adolescents can use reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking to learn what they need and want to learn and can demonstrate and communicate that learning to others who need or want to know.*

The Strategic Planning Group acknowledged the legitimacy of the multiple literacies possessed by adolescents, many of which exist only outside of school (e.g., hip hop music, instant messaging, media literacy, consumer literacy, poetry slams) or exist inside and outside of school in competing forms (e.g., technological literacy, cultural literacy). However, from an equity standpoint, the Strategic Planning Group felt that motivating and engaging youth with literacy in general, and academic literacy in particular, needs to be the focus of community-wide efforts. That is, being able to use reading, writing, and speaking effectively to read history, write scientific reports, and speak mathematically, for example, are important skills that are co-requisites for content-area learning. It is often academic literacy habits and skills that are weak for many urban youth and it is this type of literacy that is most strongly related to success in school, college and the workplace.

### Adolescents in Their Communities: Multiple Spheres of Influence

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*When I go to church there's always a couple of elderly people who are looking out for me. They always ask me what's going on, how's school, how are the grades. They have faith in me, they see something in me, so they want to help me out.*

Cushman, K., in press.

Adolescents operate in numerous and diverse contexts—at school, with family, with peers, in their neighborhood, as participants in youth programs, at church, in recreation and other youth programs, at work, and in the judicial system. Most young people are strongly influenced by the pop culture of entertainment, music, and sports. For many, school is among the least influential of these contexts. We call these contexts *Spheres of Influence* on adolescents, as shown in Figure 1.

Adolescents are heavily influenced by—and thrive on—individual relationships, especially those that nurture their desired view of themselves; acknowledge their strengths; respect their values, attitudes, and orientations; help them overcome obstacles and achieve goals; and encourage their expression. The most positive and strongest of these relationships may be in any of the multiple venues in which adolescents function. Having such relationships is fundamental to motivating constructive action on the part of young people with poor literacy skills, and to overcoming negative environmental forces that can override the influence of positive individual relationships with respected adults and peers.

Within each sphere of influence are adults and peers who can have either a positive, neutral, or negative effect on youth. The person or persons in an adolescent's life with the power to motivate, encourage, support, and reinforce progress might be a family member, counselor, coach, minister, youth worker, employer, police officer, entertainer, or friend. If encouraging messages are coming from multiple respected sources, the chances of motivating action increase. Therefore, the most

promising approach is one that penetrates and mobilizes many entities and environmental influences, so that common messages are delivered through multiple “touch points,” and multiple routes to accessing support are available. Even if a young person is motivated to pursue higher levels of literacy, he or she may not know where to begin, or have the self-confidence to take the first steps. An adult with a close relationship with that adolescent can provide “just-in-time” direction and support. Individuals in each of these spheres of influence have the potential to promote and support literacy development in their transactions with adolescents.

The graphic in Figure 2 illustrates the relationships among the Spheres of Influence. The overlapping circles indicate that the transactions within and across spheres—and between adolescents and each sphere—is bi-directional. The intended effect is a synergistic focus that impacts goals, motivation, identity, needs and values related to literacy, and to achieve literacy outcomes for adolescents.

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## SPHERES OF INFLUENCE ON ADOLESCENTS

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### SITUATIONAL/CULTURAL

#### Families

Parents, Siblings, Extended Family, Foster Care

#### Friends/Peers/Associations

Neighborhood, School, Activities

#### Media/Popular Culture

Movies, TV, Radio, Magazines, ‘Zines, E-zines, Music, Sports, Entertainment, Product Marketing

#### Retail/Commercial

Stores, Malls, Other Businesses

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### INSTITUTIONAL

#### Education Agencies

Public Middle and High Schools, After School Programs, Extra-Curricular Programs,  
Alternative Schools, Clubs, Supplemental Educational Services, School-to-Work Programs,  
Private/Parochial Schools, Adult Basic Education, Higher Education

#### Health and Human Service Agencies and Programs

Clinics, Mental Health Institutions, Group Homes, Social Services, Foster Care, WIC Program,  
Housing Authority, Family Resource Centers

#### Law Enforcement

Neighborhood Police, PAL, Juvenile Justice System, Probation and Parole,  
Ex-Offender Programs, Juvenile Detention Centers

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### ORGANIZATIONAL

#### Programs Operated by Community-Based Organizations

Neighborhood Centers, Libraries, Museums, Urban Leagues, Churches/FBO’s, Charitable  
Organizations, Cultural Groups, Social Organizations, Civic Groups, Recreation Organizations

#### Youth Development Programs and Services

Urban Leagues; YMCA/YWCA; Teen Clubs; Big Sister/Big Brother; Family,  
Community, and Career Leaders of America; Parks and Recreation: 4H

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### OCCUPATIONAL

#### Paid Employment

After School and Summer Jobs

#### Community Service

Court-Ordered, School Directed or Personal Volunteerism or Requirement

#### Job Training

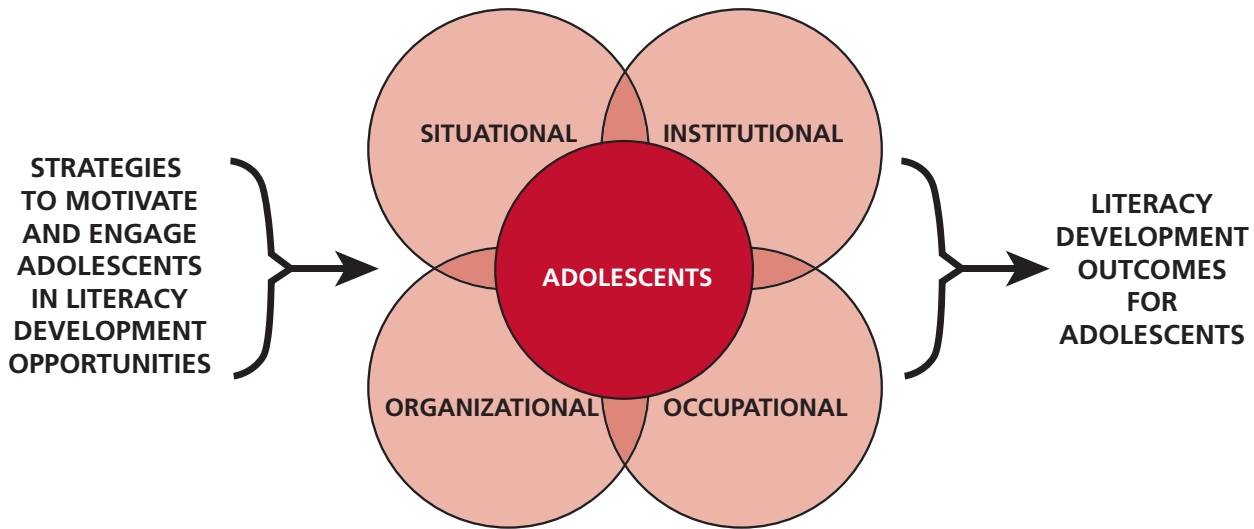
Private Industry Programs, Civic Groups

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*National Urban League, 2004*

**Figure 1.** *Spheres of Influence on Adolescents*

## MOBILIZING MULTIPLE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT



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### *Transactions Between Adolescents and Others with Potential Impact on . . .*

- Goals
  - Motivation
  - Identity
  - Needs
  - Values
- . . . Related to Literacy*

**Figure 2.** *Mobilizing Multiple Spheres of Influence to Support Adolescent Literacy Development*

### Leveraging Spheres of Influence to Achieve Outcomes for Adolescents and Communities

There are many leverage points for stimulating literacy development and support in each Sphere of Influence. For example, individual relationships can be leveraged to encourage a community-based program to incorporate literacy development in their programming. The strategy employed might be to provide information on the urgency of the need and on the literacy activities that could be incorporated. The outcome might be increased literacy development opportunities for youth. The *Adolescent Literacy Community Mobilization Matrix* in Figure 3 depicts the relationship among these elements, and subsequent sections elaborate on them. This matrix will be an important tool in developing local strategic plans for mobilization and in creating awareness and developing agreements with youth development and education groups. Note that maximizing the use of existing leverage points for literacy development will only work if what is offered to youth allows them to develop voice, is authentic, and contributes to youth well-being and development by creating more choices, access, and availability of support.

**Key Leverage Points.** Operating strategically to mobilize change requires taking advantage of key leverage points—places in complex systems where focused action can result in a large pay-off. These include:

*Individual Relationships:* Influencing beliefs, values, priorities, and actions through established relationships based on trust and mutual respect.

Examples might include: A respected adult suggests a book to read that connects to a teen’s interests or life situation and puts it in his/her hands; a teen book club that meets, reads, and eats together is started by a favorite teacher and some students, with funding by a local business for books and food; an uncle invites a teen to participate in a Bible study class he is teaching.

*Needs, Assets, Goals and Priorities:* Connecting literacy development to the characteristics of adolescents, families, organizations, and communities.

Examples might include: Students who want to work in various professions are mentored by adults working in those professions and the mentoring includes a focus on the types of literacy demands that are required in those areas; teens work with teachers to develop a computer and language course for their parents who are speakers of other languages; students in a nearby college who are majoring in math and science tutor middle schoolers in how to read, write, and speak mathematically and scientifically.

*Existing Collaborative Structures and Networks:* Integrating literacy development within established vehicles for action.

Examples might include: Local coalition efforts to decrease drug use or teen pregnancy ask teens to develop written and visual messages that will effectively reach other teens and to create resource lists of places and sources for information and assistance; the local Black Repertory Theatre actively recruits teens and supports them to develop theatre pieces using a variety of theatrical genres that address contemporary social issues and to develop the written materials to communicate their work to others.

*Social Capital/Cohesion:* Building on and drawing from core community values, norms, and assets.

Examples might include: Developing visible book sets by Black and Latino authors that are available for book exchanges at key places throughout the community; sponsoring theme-based poster contests, community poetry slams, and youth music competitions; developing homework clubs providing free childcare so older students can be relieved of the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings and receive homework assistance.

*Existing Programs and Services:* Embedding literacy development within the goals and activities of programs serving adolescents.

Examples might include: Big Brothers/Big Sisters reading and discussing “community books” with their “littles”; after-school programs that provide teens with the means to create multimedia projects about topics of importance to them that get shared with others; tutoring or homework clubs that incorporate strategic reading assistance into how they help students.

*Communication Mechanisms:* Gaining access to local media, organization channels, community bulletin boards, etc.

Examples might include: Billboards on buses advocating the importance of reading; “book commercials” being offered regularly on local cable networks; advertisements of poetry slams, read-ins, and other literacy events; a local teen-produced newsletter of “good reads” that is distributed all over the community where teens and adults spend time waiting.

*Laws and Policies:* Advocating for new mandates or changes in existing mandates to strengthen support for literacy development.

Examples might include: Pushing the school district to hire literacy specialists in all middle and high schools; mandating that all secondary teachers take professional development in the area of content area reading; making sure that school libraries stay open late and are staffed for community use as resource areas and that programs are regularly scheduled there that are led by teens; and getting districts to require that all middle and high schools have literacy action plans that have been reviewed by parents.

**Adolescent Literacy Community Mobilization Matrix**

<b>SPHERES OF INFLUENCE ON ADOLESCENTS</b>	<b>KEY LEVERAGE POINTS</b>	<b>STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT</b>	<b>OUTCOMES FOR ADOLESCENTS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES</b>	
<b>Situational/ Environmental</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Families</li> <li>Friends/Peers</li> <li>Media/Popular Culture</li> </ul> <b>Institutional</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education Agencies</li> <li>Health and Human Service Agencies</li> <li>Law Enforcement</li> </ul> <b>Organizational</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community-Based Organizations</li> <li>Youth Development Programs and Services</li> <li>Youth Organizations</li> </ul> <b>Occupational</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid Employment</li> <li>Community Service</li> <li>Job Training</li> </ul>	Individual Relationships  Needs, Assets, Goals, and Priorities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adolescents</li> <li>Families</li> <li>Organizations</li> <li>Communities</li> </ul> Existing Collaborative Structures and Networks  Social Capital/ Cohesion  Existing Programs and Services  Communication Mechanisms (including local media)  Laws and Policies	Create/Expand Awareness, Urgency, Understanding, Vision  Provide Data  Provide Leadership, Take Initiative  Provide Training and Education  Facilitate Connections  Share Models of Good Practice  Provide Incentives and Rewards  Provide/Generate Resources  Develop/Refocus/Enhance Programs, Services, and Interventions  Develop/Revise/Propose Policies  Engage with Other Stakeholders Around Shared Goals, Needs, and Purposes  Build/Expand Collaborative Structures  Sponsor Community Forums or Summits  Co-Opt “WIFMs” (“What’s in it for me?”)	<b>Progress</b>	<b>Impact</b>
			<b>OUTCOMES FOR ADOLESCENTS</b>	
			Greater Availability of Programs and Services  Expanded Options: Types of Programs, Formats, Locations, Content  Improved Quality of Programs and Services	More Adolescents Get Literacy Support  Programs and Services Address Diverse Needs and Characteristics  Increased Completion Rates; Greater Resilience; Greater Goal Attainment  Higher Level of Learning and Expanded Opportunities for Youth
			<b>OUTCOMES FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES</b>	
		More Effective Support for Literacy  Sustainable Community Commitment	Steady Progress Toward Full Literacy Over Time  Improved Schools	

**Figure 3.** Adolescent Literacy Community Mobilization Matrix

Some additional examples of leveraging action through modest effort include:

- A community organization takes the initiative to launch and lead the effort and interacts with other organizations to build awareness, urgency, and buy-in.
- Members of a parent group get trained in strategic tutoring approaches and offers to work with teens at a local church, recreation program, or after-school program to assist in supporting literacy development.
- A school district asks for help from parents and community members to serve as literacy advocates in the school and neighborhood and provides books in the languages spoken by people in the area to be distributed.
- A community-based organization applies to become a Supplemental Education Services Provider and focuses on literacy development.
- A local Women’s, Infants, and Children’s (WIC) program asks university faculty to work with teen mothers on literacy development strategies when they come to the center to receive food stipends.

- The Mayor's office sponsors a program to recognize the coach and students who participate on victorious *Battle of the Books* teams.
- A business group offers stipends to students who participate in literacy support programs.
- An employer establishes a vocabulary program or book club on work time.
- A group of ministers identifies a specific Sunday on which their sermons will address the need for literacy support and gives examples of what congregation members can do.

As the examples suggest, every stakeholder can take the initiative themselves, or be the focus of others who seek to build community, organizational, and individual assets.

**Strategies for Increasing Literacy Development and Support.** The strategies listed on the Adolescent Literacy Community Mobilization Matrix have proven powerful and even essential in other arenas. Some examples are:

*Create/Expand Awareness, Urgency, Understanding, Vision:* Provide print materials, public information campaigns, sermons, billboards, presentations, etc.

*Provide Data:* Create summaries of state assessment results for local schools with comparisons to state and other district results. Show results for specific sub-groups. Provide summaries of information on the literacy issue from this paper.

*Provide Leadership, Take Initiative:* Volunteer to organize an Education Summit, run for school board, organize a community group, promote action in membership groups.

*Provide Training and Education:* Get trained on literacy support strategies, bring in speakers, sponsor parent training, develop courses.

*Facilitate Connections:* Introduce people from different sectors, sponsor joint meetings, share mailing lists, publicize others' events.

*Share Models of Good Practice:* Distribute literacy development resources, sponsor training and presentations, arrange observations, solicit strategies from local literacy programs.

*Provide Incentives and Rewards:* Provide cash or product rewards for literacy achievement, create employment opportunities tied to participation and achievement in literacy programs.

*Provide/Generate Resources:* Donate money, employee time, books, facilities, staff, equipment, materials, transportation.

*Develop/Refocus/Enhance Programs, Services, and Interventions:* Add a literacy component to after school programs, youth development activities, extra-curricular activities; seek funding to launch new programs.

*Develop/Revise/Propose Policies:* School district, city regulations, and state legislation re: resource allocation, use of facilities, transportation, curriculum.

*Engage with Other Stakeholders Around Shared Goals, Needs, and Purposes:* Review materials from other organizations; attend meetings; meet to discuss common needs, goals, priorities; test potential joint projects.

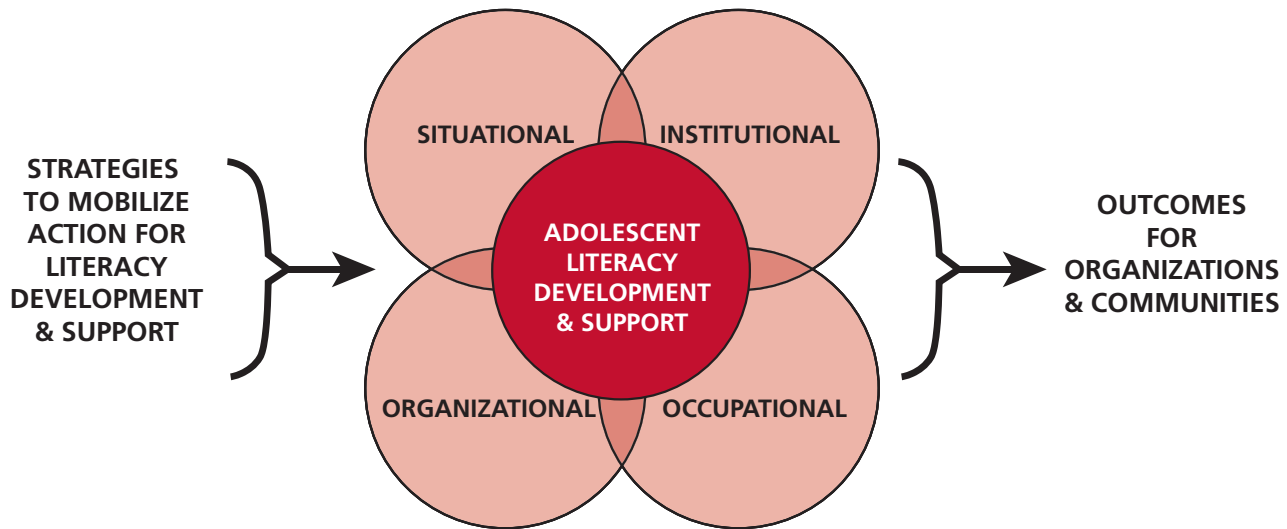
*Build/Expand Collaborative Structures:* Solicit membership from other sectors, promote common cause, promote broadening of membership rules,

*Sponsor Community Forums or Summits:* Invite community leaders to collaborate on a high profile event, build on events such as release of data, solicit corporate sponsors.

*Co-Opt "WIFMs" ("What's in it for me?"):* Determine others' goals and priorities, provide public recognition opportunities for community leaders, barter resources.

**Outcomes for Adolescents, Organizations, and Communities.** The Strategic Planning Model is designed to produce both **progress outcomes** and **impact outcomes** for adolescents, organizations, and communities. Achieving outcomes for adolescents will result from the efforts of the entities in each Sphere of Influence. The outcomes for organizations and communities will result from building the capacity of each sphere to address literacy development. Thus, we can think of them as *Spheres of Assets* that can be mobilized toward the goal of full literacy and meaningful school reform. Figure 4 depicts this.

## SPHERES OF ASSETS FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT



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*Transactions Between Mobilizers and Individuals/Organizations  
in Each Sphere with Potential to Impact on  
Support for Adolescent Literacy Development*

**Figure 4.** *Spheres of Assets for Literacy Development*

The Conceptual Framework described in Figure 4 is solidly anchored in research and practice knowledge about what works. But, how would a community take it from the theoretical to the practical? How can the framework be implemented? Can it produce the desired changes and outcomes? The implementation component of the Strategic Planning model, as described in the next section, addresses four critical strategic priorities, the factors that are seen as essential to success, and a phased implementation process.

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*More than being merely a pleasant frame in which to work or in keeping with our democratic beliefs, community—with its sense of both cooperation and critical judgment—may be essential to meaningful, deep learning.*

Doll, 1993

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Increasing learning and academic achievement for larger numbers of children, especially those in urban centers, relies on a complex interplay of structures, supports, and opportunities. While tinkering with one element might yield some outcomes in the direction hoped for, achieving the goals of education reform requires change on multiple levels. Changes at the structural level include changes in how schools are organized to address the academic and youth development needs of diverse learners. Supports must be available in a variety of in-school and out-of-school contexts. All children and youth need multiple high-quality opportunities to develop the cognitive, social, cultural, psychological and spiritual knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to succeed. These conditions represent essential “youth-oriented social capital” (Putnam, Feldstein, & Cohen, 2004).

### Four Critical Strategic Priorities

Four areas are of such critical importance in mobilizing communities to support adolescent literacy development that they warrant further discussion. They are:

- Reforming Public Education
- Engaging Parents and Families
- Connecting Adolescent Literacy to Youth Development and Out-of-School Time
- Fostering Youth Leadership and Voice

### Reforming Public Education

*A quality public education in America is not a personal privilege, it is a community enterprise. If excellence can be provided for some students in the public schools, it can be provided for each of them... Failing schools need dramatic interruption and intervention. There are no short cuts, but the longer road is navigable. It's a journey we must make together and, for citizens who really care about quality education for all, it begins with a single step through the front door of the troubled schoolhouse in your community. This is national policy at the grassroots.*

Parents for Public Schools, 2002

Despite our diversity as a nation, Americans today are strongly united around the value of education and the belief that all children, regardless of family income, race, ethnic background, or gender should have access to a quality education that prepares them to lead productive lives and fulfill the duties of citizenship. But the persistent low achievement of a large percentage of our young people has given rise to waves of education reform over the past two decades. While many school districts have instituted fundamental reforms, many others have lacked the will, skill, or wherewithal to make meaningful or systemic changes. Still others have tried to implement a wide range of initiatives without altering the basic infrastructure of strategic planning, goal setting, coordination, collaboration, and communication. The result is a hodgepodge of fragmented activity and a condition often described as *initiative fatigue*, which not only drains energy and resources, but fosters cynicism and resistance on the part of front-line educators who are expected to implement change without adequate training and support.

Successful reforms to date have often depended on the vision, skills, and determination of a superintendent or principal; on short-term grant funding; on a state school improvement initiative; or a combination of factors. When leaders move on, grants end, and state government changes, these reforms tend to falter. Adding to the challenges of education reform are the problems of attracting and retaining good teachers and administrators, dealing with budget cuts and the resulting lack of educational resources, overcrowding and woefully inadequate facilities, and lack of parent engagement and support. Not to be under valued are the social and cultural dynamics of schools: “The worst schools suffer from deeply rooted cultures of failure and distrust, are politically-conflicted, personality-driven and racially-tense, have difficulty learning from their own experiences, have difficulty communicating internally, have difficulty following through even when they achieve consensus about what to do, have shallow pools of relevant professional skill, unstable staffs, and exist in a larger institutional environment that is itself unstable and ill-equipped to do much more than issue mandates and threats” (Payne & Kaba, 2001).

The limited results of early improvement initiatives resulted in upping the ante through more recent education reform legislation and initiatives, including the landmark No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The scope of these changes, and the obstacles to enacting them, are daunting. The centerpiece of NCLB is the establishment of content standards and related student proficiencies to which students, schools, districts, and states are held accountable. The focus of these standards is both broad and deep; the typical state framework for a core subject area (English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) includes dozens of standards, each of which have dozens of sub-standards. Many of the standards statements are dense with content.

Despite the number and scope of content standards in each subject area, one focus unifies them: literacy. Becoming proficient—and being able to demonstrate proficiency—in virtually all content standards requires high literacy skills and disciplined literacy. This unifying focus can be the key to mobilizing multiple stakeholders toward meaningful education reform. Rather than competing with other reform requirements—aligning the curriculum, instruction, and assessment with standards; building the capacity of district and school staff; establishing accountability systems; creating collaborative school cultures; monitoring student learning; and redesigning secondary schools—a focus on literacy development and support helps people connect the dots (Williams & Meltzer, 2004).

To a large extent, conditions that inhibit meaningful reform are beyond the influence of school administrators and teachers who function as employees of their communities. As employers, school boards, community members, and parents must embrace the goals of reform and become active participants in the improvement process.

Examples of initiatives that meaningfully involve parents and other community stakeholders in educational reform have proliferated over the past several years. Many initially modest parent and community involvement efforts have grown into long-standing compacts, alliances, public education funds, and nonprofit organizations focused on the improvement, reform, and even reinventing of education. Concerns that these initiatives were simply a fad have dissipated, and there is widespread agreement that collaborative vehicles involving parents and community stakeholders in planning, promoting, and supporting reform at the local levels pays off in many ways (Otterbourg, 2000). The success of this movement is reflected in the many provisions of the NCLB legislation that require parent and community involvement in reform and improvement efforts (Public Education Network, 2002).

But mandates, even far reaching ones like NCLB, don't guarantee action. Without external pressure to take the requirements seriously—and to take reform seriously—many schools and districts pay only lip service to the responsibility to substantively engage parents and community members as partners in the reform process. Several national groups have taken up the banner of public engagement in education reform to accelerate and expand local reform efforts. These include the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education; the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships; the Public Education Network; the National PTA; Public Agenda; the Center for Education Reform; the Center on Education Policy; Phi Delta Kappa; the Annenberg Institute for School Reform; the National League of Cities; the Center for Development and Learning; the National Urban League; and dozens of foundations, professional associations, universities, and research institutes. Adding to these are scores of state and local organizations and initiatives formed to actively promote public engagement in reform, build demand for change, and hold schools accountable for equity and achievement.

An example of the types of resources produced by the groups noted above is shown in Figure 5. It outlines a range of roles for community members and parents in leveraging the mandates of NCLB. The figure is included in a publication from the Public Education Network called *Using NCLB to Improve Student Achievement: An Action Guide for Community and Parent Leaders* (Fege & Smith, 2002, p. 8).

COMMUNITY	PARENTS
Work with parents	Work with the community
Focus on the community and the school district	Focus on classrooms and schools
Educate the public about NCLB	Educate parents about NCLB
Host town meetings and dialogues on critical issues	Make sure <i>all</i> parents are included and involved in town meetings
Link community services with parents and schools	Make sure the community is linked with parents and schools
Organize the community to demand quality schools	Participate in district and school decision-making
Monitor NCLB implementation	Get involved in developing parental involvement policies
Use data to promote community action around informed decisions	Use data to improve student learning
Provide teachers and parents with professional development and training	Organize parents to demand improvement of low-performing schools
Work with the media to promote understanding of school improvement	Hold elected officials accountable for quality schools

**Figure 5.** Roles for Community Members and Parents in Leveraging the Mandates of No Child Left Behind

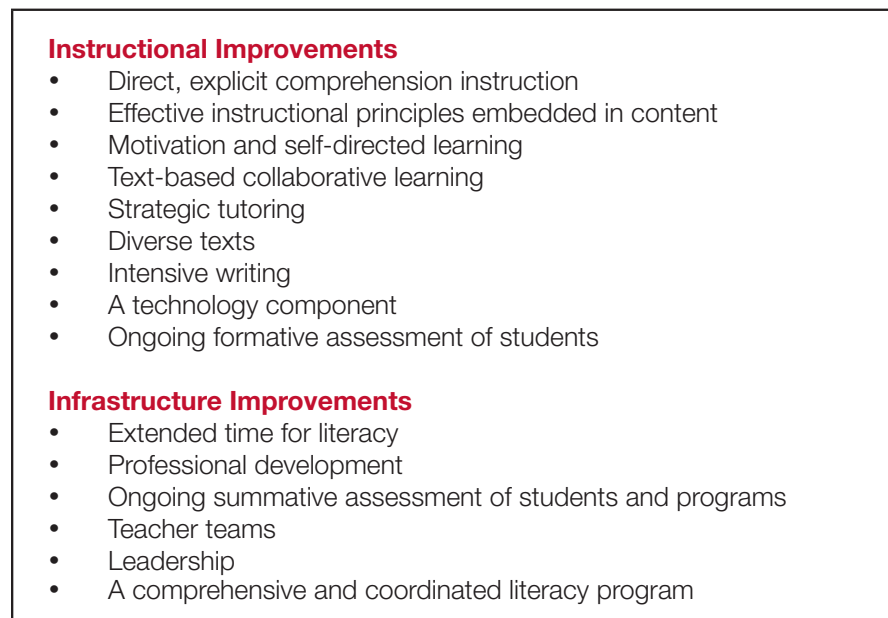
Constituency-building is the key to successful urban education reform, and there is a growing body of knowledge about what works. A major study supported by the Ford Foundation (2003) analyzed the constituency-building strategies of several urban education reform initiatives: the Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform; the Interfaith Education Fund; the National Coalition of Advocates for Students; Parents for Public Schools; the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence; the Public Education Network; and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund. The study identified several roles and strategies related to constituency building:

- Create mechanisms and arenas that open new experiences for constituents.
- Provide training, support, and opportunities to take on new roles.
- Mentor individuals and support activist networks so people stay involved.
- Assert constitutional and legislative rights.
- Build relationships for shared power.
- Expand power bases through coalitions.
- Create more inclusive governance structures.

The resulting impact includes:

- Greater understanding and a recognition of shared interests.
- Stronger political will to hold public education institutions accountable.
- Changed roles, relationships, and power dynamics.

Efforts to significantly improve student achievement for all students will require multiple constituencies to engage substantively in systemic initiatives focused on adolescent literacy development and support, to demand schools to improve reading and writing instruction throughout the middle and upper grades, and to assist them to communicate literacy as a priority for all young people. Improving adolescent literacy will require major changes in both the education infrastructure and instruction, as outlined by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** *Key Elements in Programs Designed to Improve Adolescent Literacy Achievement in Middle and High Schools*

In its summary of lessons learned from the Collaborating for Education Reform Initiative (CERI), the Ford Foundation listed the following as what mattered most:

- The inclusion of stakeholders integral to the local context and able to contribute to the collaborative's goals.
- The perceived legitimacy and authority of the lead organization.
- How collaborative members worked together.
- The characteristics of, and action by, the collaborative leadership.
- The fostering of the collaborative's legitimacy and reputation over time.
- The matching of goals to the local context.
- The adept use of data to inform theories of action and activities.
- The habit of continuously reflecting on work and the use of data to alter strategies as necessary.
- Early attention to a plan for institutionalizing systemic change, including strategies for sustaining the collaborative, as well as sustaining and scaling-up the reform agenda.

As local constituency groups become more involved in education reform, and more invested in the directions it takes, they begin to share responsibility for improving results. This is essential for true collaboration to occur, without which engagement becomes another barrier to reform.

*Many people think of adolescence as a stage where there is so much peer influence that parents become both irrelevant and powerless. . . . Parents are just as important to adolescents as they are to smaller children.*

Adolescent Health Survey, 1998

*Schools that continue to label parents as “visitors,” will never know the power of “partners.”*

Butler, 2001

In this time when schools and programs for youth are increasingly judged on their effectiveness in improving student success, it is important that *all* resources, including those that families bring, are channeled toward these goals. The stakes are high for youth, their schools, programs, and communities. Where schools and programs are not reaching out appropriately, some families, communities, and youth themselves are demanding a more inclusive approach designed to tap and build upon the valuable resources that both youth and their families can provide.

Research on family influences, and on the lives of adolescents in particular, indicates that involving families can augment the efficacy of many other strategies for improving a variety of youth outcomes. Studies that examined parental attitudes toward school and academic achievement reveal that the family’s attitudes toward school and the emphasis they place on education are better indicators of academic success than family structure, demographics, and income (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

However, too often, because of the discontinuities between teachers/administrators and the communities in which their schools are located, school personnel tend to view parents as needing to change and having little to offer. This deficit model is clearly detrimental to the development of positive attitudes about education and good working relationships between the community and the school (Cotton & Wikelund, 2001). The typical parent involvement paradigm has two components, neither of which are compatible with the realities of high-poverty parents in urban communities. The first is based on “what good parents do” to support their child’s education; that is, “good” parents read to their children, help with homework, make sure the child gets to school every day, and so on. Numerous factors make these behaviors far more challenging for poor (and poorly educated) parents than for well-to-do and well-educated parents. Second, schools tend to judge the extent to which parents are involved in terms of school-sponsored activities (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, science fairs). Again, the structure and process of many of these activities are in opposition to the cultures and realities of many parents.

Successful parent engagement programs are those that have overcome the barriers that prevent or inhibit parents from having easy access and interaction with schools and acting as true partners with teachers in their children’s education. School and community initiatives to engage parents in supporting adolescent literacy development must work with schools to provide adequate training and ongoing support for the types of parent involvement that can make a difference. Schools also need to recognize that family members other than parents—grandparents, uncles and aunts, older siblings—can contribute in important ways, either as surrogates to birth parents or as additional assets who can contribute to learning. These family members need to be encouraged to get involved and be welcomed when they do.

**How Families Can Support Learning and Achievement.** A large body of research confirms the value and importance of parent involvement in their child’s education. Studies on the impact of parent and family involvement on student learning and achievement share one overarching conclusion: there is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. This outcome holds true for families of all economic, racial/ethnic, educational backgrounds, and for students at all ages. The benefits for students include (Epstein, 1995):

- Higher grade-point averages and scores on standardized tests or rating scales
- Enrollment in more challenging academic programs
- More classes passed and credits earned
- Better attendance
- Improved behavior at home and at school
- Better social skills and adaptation to school

Parents of children at the elementary level are heavily involved in their children’s education, both through communicating with the school and helping their child at home. But, as students move through the upper elementary and secondary grades, parents generally become less involved for many reasons: adolescents developmentally seek autonomy and greater self-determination; families often live further from the high school and are less able to spend time there; secondary school curricula is more complex; students have multiple teachers; and parents of older students are more likely to be employed (Lucas & Lusthaus, 1978; Hollifield, 1994). Other factors include lack of transportation or child care for younger children, embarrassment or shyness about one’s own educational level or linguistic abilities, lack of understanding or information about the structure of the

<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the diverse nature of parenting relationships, we use the term, “Families as Partners” here. This term encompasses biological or adoptive parents, stepparents, court-appointed guardians, foster parents, grandparents or other relatives, married and unmarried couples, and other arrangements that fulfill the primary child-rearing role.

school and accepted communication channels, perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators, and teachers and administrators' assumptions of parents' disinterest or inability to help with children's schooling.

Parent and family involvement that is focused on student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. To be most effective, parent involvement should be focused on improving achievement and be designed to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The level of national consensus about how much families should be involved in the education, job training, and other services offered to their children, based on decades of research, is clearly evident in federal legislation. In 1971, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) required the participation of parents of Title I students (economically disadvantaged, requiring compensatory education) in parent advisory councils (PACs) at district levels. By 1978, the PACs' authority had been expanded to include the planning, implementation, and evaluation of Title I projects. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and expanded parental involvement by making it one of four basic principles: 1) stronger accountability for results; 2) increased flexibility and local control; 3) an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work; and 4) expanded options for parents. To receive federal education funds, local educational agencies must foster parental involvement in a variety of ways, including:

- Involving parents in all planning processes in a meaningful way.
- Providing parents a written parental involvement policy in a format and language that is understandable to them.
- Holding annual meetings with parents at flexible times and locations.
- Conducting an annual evaluation of the effectiveness of parent involvement.
- Identifying and addressing barriers to increased parental involvement (particularly for parents who are economically disadvantaged, have limited English proficiency, limited literacy, who are of any racial or ethnic minority background, or who are disabled).
- Reserving some funds to increase family literacy and parenting skills.
- Helping build parents' capacity for strong parental involvement through assistance in understanding state academic content standards and assessments.
- Providing materials for parents to work at home on their children's achievement.
- Using technology to foster parent involvement.

The law also suggests *optional* opportunities for parents, including:

- Involving parents in the development of training for teachers.
- Paying expenses associated with transportation and child care to attend parent meetings.
- Training parents to enhance the involvement of other parents.
- Arranging school meetings at a variety of times, or conducting in-home conferences, with parents who are unable to attend such conferences at school.

NCLB also requires that schools develop—with parents—a plan to meet these requirements, called a school-parent compact and a plan to involve parents. Federally-funded Parent Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs) are charged with informing parents of the provisions of NCLB and providing resources and support for helping parents get involved. Though there is still a long way to go, particularly in poor urban areas, more and more local school councils (LSCs) are being launched, and there are important indications of their effects. As one Chicago parent put it, "A suburban parent comes in with a sense of entitlement: This is my child, and this is what's going to happen. Big-city parents don't usually have that edge. But with the local school council behind you, they're not as likely to try to blow [the parent] off" (Paulson, 2003).

Several types of parent engagement have been documented; when taken together, the diverse needs, assets, and goals of parents can be well-served:

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. Parenting                    | Help families establish home environments to support children as students.   |
| 2. Communicating                | Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's programs.                                    |
| 3. Volunteering                 | Recruit and organize parent help and support.  |
| 4. Learning at Home             | Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. |
| 5. Decision Making              | Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.  |
| 6. Collaborating with Community | Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, student learning, and development.         |

Adapted from Epstein, 1995

A large percentage of African-American parents believe strongly in school involvement, and many attempt to intervene in their children's schools (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1996). Cultural models that emphasize getting ahead through collective struggle inform African-American parents' involvement strategies, and in some cases result in very robust and sustained reform efforts that break down "the stubborn bureaucratic refusal to engage democratically with working class communities of color" (Fine & Weis, 2003).

Indeed, "successful school reform organizing requires an effective working relationship with educators based on accountability, and an educational strategy based on both an assessment of local school failure and knowledge of how low-performing schools can improve...organizing can indeed disrupt and transform the paternalistic relationships that exist between too many urban public schools and their poor, predominantly non-white and often immigrant communities... improving student outcomes for poor children of color begins with building the parent and community power necessary to hold school systems accountable" (Institute for Education and Social Policy, 2003).

Parents for Public Schools (2003) offers these suggestions for transforming relationships that lead to meaningful engagement and improved student achievement:

- Recognize that parent involvement is fundamental to student success. Be clear in your own mind about why you want our involvement. Be specific with us about what it is you want us to do.
- Don't assume we don't know what to do or that we're not interested. Some of us bring powerful skills and energy for change.
- Find those of us who share your vision for change. Engage us in the big work and give us credence as legitimate players.
- Help us to understand what you expect of our students. And, help us to see how these expectations are directly linked to a high standard of learning.
- Gain our confidence and trust by gearing your performance as if your own child depended on it. Ours do.
- Just as with students, every parent comes with a different level of readiness. Honor where each of us is and build from there.
- Call us with good news, not just the bad.
- Ask us to be mentors for other parents who may not be inclined to be involved or know what to do. As parents, we need to lean on, learn from, and lead each other.
- For those of us who are reluctant to come to school to see you, come to our homes or hold a group meeting at a neutral site in our neighborhood. While this may be a lot to ask, without it we'll never get the message about how important our involvement is.
- Demonstrate that crossing the comfort zones of race, economics, language, and culture may be hard for you, too, but worth the effort.
- Involve more of us in planning at the school and district levels. When we are part of the process, you might stop seeing us as just part of the problem.
- Include us in decision-making if you want us to have confidence in the decisions.
- Focus our conversations on teaching and learning. And, recognize when we are trying to focus yours.
- Don't stop at identifying the barriers to our involvement. A school culture that truly believes the parent connection is important to student success will do whatever it takes to make it happen—including the reallocation of school and community resources.

One important role that parents can play is informing educators about successful models that exist to build upon students' literacies and strengthen them as academic readers and writers. Informing teachers about the work of Carol Lee, Arnetha Ball, Donna Alvermann, the Arts Literacy Project, David O'Brien, Jennifer Obidah, and others and discussing with teachers what they like about the work of these educators will open dialogues about what is currently working and not working to engage their children in academic literacy development in school. PTO's can sponsor workshops with these educators and press for district emphasis on literacy at the upper grades. PTO's can become informed about school-wide literacy development models as Talent Development high schools, the Strategic Instruction Model, and the Reading Apprenticeship Framework, and can advocate that schools look into these and others. It is important to note that "same old, same old" has not served the majority of urban youth well; that parents know there are alternatives; and they insist that those alternatives be put into place.

Parents and other family members can and must play an active leadership role in their communities to establish, strengthen, and monitor parent involvement to support adolescent literacy development. Community mobilization efforts must make this a priority.

*No single community organization can provide the range of developmental, preventive, and intervention programs and services required to give young people the experiences they need to mature into successful adults. Rather, creation of such programs requires collaborative planning by a community's youth-serving agencies, other social services and educational institutions, policymakers, community leaders, and young people.*

National Council on Families and Youth

Noted educational researcher Dr. Edmund W. Gordon, Director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, Columbia University, has written extensively on what it will take to eliminate the educational underdevelopment of vast numbers of our young people—to close the academic achievement gap. He states that, "... beyond exposure to the school's formal academic curriculum, high academic achievement is closely associated with exposure to family and community-based activities and learning experiences in support of academic development that occurs outside of school" (1999).

*For low-SES and non-Asian students of color, these opportunities are generally underutilized. In the home environment, for example, high achieving students benefit from literate adults, home computers, books, magazines, journals, and the academic assistance and encouragement of older siblings and parents. In terms of community resources, the combination of local library privileges, mentoring and tutoring programs, peer-based study groups, Saturday and/or after-school academies, and participation in various folk and "high" cultural events and faith-based activities, influence the development of proactive and engaged dispositions toward academic learning.*

*In addition, given that students are greatly influenced by the social contexts in which they develop, their academic achievement and competencies may be dependent upon the extent to which their social contexts, both natural and contrived, support desired ends. Some of these essential contextual supports have been described as various forms of human and social capital that enable and facilitate academic learning and personal development. The necessary human capital includes adults and peers who themselves are sources of know how and are models of the behaviors and achievements that students can emulate. The social capital is represented in the networks of support, the connections to sources of information and resources, and the expectations of the group to which a person belongs. For students who are not naturally exposed to academically demanding environments, parents as well as educators will need to create high performance learning communities (whether they are in the form of families, peer groups, classrooms, social groups, or institutions) where serious academic work is respected, standards are explicit, and high achievement is rewarded.*

Gordon, 1999

Gordon uses the term *supplemental education* when referring to the types of activities that build human and social capital for youth. A similar lens is that of *positive youth development*—"a policy perspective that emphasizes providing services and opportunities to support all young people in developing a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and empowerment" (Administration for Children and Youth). Positive youth development is a relatively new perspective that represents a major shift in the youth development field. "Over the last ten years, among many leaders in the youth development field, there has been a sea of change in how we think about young people. We have come to realize that all young people—even those who grow up in unfortunate conditions—have tremendous capacities for achievement, service, and happy, meaningful lives. Focusing on the strengths, talents, and energies of young people, and fostering motivation and purpose in the young, is a far more realistic and effective approach than focusing on their shortcomings, deficits, problems, and risks" (Damon, 2004).

Positive youth development is designed to focus on the outcomes we desire for young people, and those they desire for themselves; not the negative outcomes we hope to prevent. Positive youth development shifts the dialogue from one that focuses on youth with problems to one in which communities can begin defining what youth need to grow into healthy adults.

All communities have a rich mosaic of organizations that are already engaged in youth development.

*More than 17,000 youth-serving organizations now operate in the United States. They include such national groups as the Boy Scouts, 4-H Clubs, the YMCA and YWCA, and thousands of small, independent grassroots organizations. Many of them offer just what young adolescents say they want: safe havens where they can relax, be with their friends, and learn useful skills in the crucial after-school, weekend, and summer hours when neither schools nor parents are available to provide supervision and support.*

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995

These organizations and their programs operate outside of the school day, as after-school programs or out-of-school time (OST) programs. There is a substantial body of research that shows that participation in after-school programs is positively associated with better school attendance, more positive attitude towards school work, higher aspirations for college, finer work habits, better interpersonal skills, reduced drop out rates, higher quality homework completion, less time spent in unhealthy behaviors, and improved grades (Hall et al., 2003). Though many OST programs do not directly address academic skills, they can contribute substantially to learning:

*Quality after-school programs, by using the positive youth development approach, can incorporate the supports and opportunities necessary for young people to succeed both developmentally and academically. Some of the most desirable features of learning environments—such as intrinsic motivation, flexibility, and multiple learning arrangements—are characteristics of quality after-school programs.*

National Research Council, 2002

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After-school programs employing a positive youth development approach can help to overcome critical barriers to learning and support academic achievement and well being (Hall et al., 2003).

- They support the development of a range of non-academic competencies and characteristics that, in turn, support young people's academic learning. For instance, the social and critical thinking skills that young people learn in a project-based, collaborative after-school learning experience help young people succeed during the school day.
- They ensure that young people have critical developmental inputs that help to ensure academic success, and ensure that young people are fully prepared and fully engaged. For instance, after-school programs put children and youth in frequent and close contact with caring and encouraging adults, an important precondition to learning.
- They create a rich alternative to the learning experiences that students experience in schools. After-school programs provide opportunities for development and enrichment through activities that are often not available during the regular school day and thereby also offer positive alternative choices for time spent outside of school.
- They help to eliminate the consistent barriers to learning faced by young people. For instance, after-school programs can offer a level of engagement and specific supports that may reach youth that have otherwise been unreachable because of disruptive behavior, lack of interest, poor sense of self, or repeated failure.

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Recently, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation made the decision to target their funding exclusively to organizations that work with young people during the non-school hours, based on their belief that this is where both the need and opportunity are greatest. They state:

*Perhaps, though, the most compelling reason for targeting programs that serve kids in the non-school hours is the fact that most young people spend more than half their waking hours in the largely discretionary time outside school...*

*The point is not simply that non-school hours outnumber those of the school day. The reason out-of-school time is so critically important—particularly to preteens and adolescents—is precisely because it is discretionary. It is in these hours that young people (ideally with caring adult supervision) form habits by which they will later allocate their free time, learn to conduct themselves socially, take their first jobs, and formulate ideas about what constitutes a satisfying, worthwhile life. People develop personal interests, choose rewarding social activities, begin earning an income, and formulate dreams and ambitions partly in these hours. Some of that also happens during school time. But the difference is that, in school hours, adult influence is the norm, and young people can make only a narrow range of choices.*

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In its position statement on positive youth development, the National Council on Youth states the following beliefs:

- While parents have the primary responsibility for the social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of their children, programs that support their efforts can strengthen the ability of the family to raise healthy children, productive workers, and responsible citizens.
- A proactive, asset-based approach to youth development will benefit young people, families, and communities.
- There is a nation-wide need for a major expansion of community-based services that promote positive youth development.
- Government decisions regarding youth must not be driven by a remedial or punitive approach to the problems of young people; rather, government must adopt a comprehensive strategy to promote the positive development of all school-age youth, encouraging and empowering communities to develop and implement comprehensive plans to meet the growing needs of this often forgotten segment of our population.

- Young people should be partners with adults in decision-making that affects their lives.
- Community strategic plans for positive youth development should:
  - Identify youth development as a broad public responsibility;
  - Support the primary role of family;
  - Include young people as partners with adults in decision-making;
  - Focus on fully preparing youth for the challenges of adulthood;
  - Support the expansion of youth development opportunities provided by community-based organizations;
  - Increase community coordination and collaboration in meeting the developmental needs of youth; and
  - Raise awareness of the youth development profession.

A two-year study of community programs that promote youth development, conducted by the nonpartisan National Academy of Sciences (2001), concluded that “a diversity of program opportunities in each community is more likely to support broad adolescent development and attract the interest of, and meet the needs of, a greater number of youth.”

Just as communities have a strong vested interest in the quality of their schools, they have a similar desire to ensure that their children are engaged in worthwhile and safe activities during out-of-school time. Individuals who staff after-school programs share this desire, and many of these programs have an academic focus. But all types of programs—recreation, arts, technology, community service, and social—can incorporate activities that support literacy development by building on the literacies of the program’s activities.

For example:

- The coach of an after-school basketball program uses a “word wall” to teach youth the vocabulary of the sport. Adolescents keep a journal of coaching tips, skill development goals and progress, and periodically read excerpts to their team and discuss them.
- The leader of a homework club teaches literacy development strategies and helps students apply them to complete their homework and understand content.
- A cultural awareness program at the African-American center incorporates reading, writing, and presentations about influential historical figures and engages youth in identifying with the personal qualities of these individuals.
- A dance program encourages youth to choreograph a dance number to a story or poem they have written or read.
- A violence prevention program includes opportunities for students to write and present skits about anger management strategies.
- A youth leadership development group designs a campaign for literacy development for their peers and visits other programs in the community to promote it.
- A mentoring program encourages mentors to read, share and discuss their written work, including business writing with adolescents.

These programs already have structures and approaches in place that actively work with youth to support them to make healthy choices. A focus on literacy will be a natural connection to the aims and goals of their programs. Furthermore, these programs are where adolescents can be found and, therefore, should play a key role in developing, implementing and sustaining a community mobilization effort for adolescent literacy. To be sure, many of the leaders of after-school programs will need training, materials, and support to incorporate literacy activities. The community mobilization effort can adopt this as an objective, develop plans to achieve it, and coordinate efforts.

### Fostering Youth Leadership and Voice

*There is a growing recognition that young people are a key piston in the twin engines of civic engagement and community development. There is deepening understanding that engaging young people in civic life and community problem solving is a key ingredient of youth development.*

Pittman, (n.d.)

*This is the first time I've had something so important to participate in. It seems like I now know much more than most kids at my school—about how the education and juvenile justice systems connect, about how to analyze a speaker or writer's perspective, about how to motivate people. It makes me want to run something myself! — Alan, age 14, from the Books Not Bars project.*

The Forum for Youth Investment (2004)

Youth are powerful resources for mobilization and change, and supporting opportunities for youth participation and leadership yields one of the most powerful learning assets that communities have. In a paper linking youth organizing and youth development, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing states:

*The major difference between youth organizing and traditional youth development strategies is the degree to which youth organizing embraces both individual development and social change. Conventional youth development strategies typically focus on building individual interpersonal capacity, which includes meeting young people's need for belonging, safety, self-awareness, and self-worth, and helping them build a wide range of skills. Interpersonal capacity is strengthened when young people work with peers and adults, develop meaningful friendships and relationships, and develop positive ethnic, sexual, gender, and class identities. Interpersonal capacity also involves a broad range of measurable skills such as problem-solving, creative expression, and oral and written communication. In many contexts, youth development strategies like mentoring, leadership training, and volunteering are suitable strategies.*

*Youth organizing, however, offers two new developmental "layers," each of which is critical to healthy youth development. The first is socio-political capacity, which emphasizes connections between common community problems and broader political and social issues. Socio-political capacity shapes young people's world view about systemic and root causes of social and community problems, and encourages young people to work toward equity, fairness, and social justice. Second, by helping young people develop their skills as organizers and activists, youth organizing develops community capacity, which focuses on how communities address and change relevant community and social problems. Strong community capacity occurs when young people collectively work on community issues; develop alliances with institutions, organizations, and individuals; and shape policies to improve their communities. Community capacity also builds important analytical skills such as researching and debating issues, building consensus, and developing a sense of purpose and accomplishment in community improvement efforts.*

Ginwright, 2003

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Old paradigms of youth development focused on overcoming deficits, eliminating risky behavior, and motivating toward self-sufficiency. Those approaches, however, ignore the goals, needs, and strengths of youth themselves. The Forum for Youth Investment operates from a different perspective:

*At some point, as they begin to navigate for themselves, young people take increasing responsibility for their own development. They need and want the support of their families, peers, and communities. But their imperative is to find ways to meet their needs, feel wanted and valued, build skills that seem useful, and make a difference on the issues that matter to them. This developmental imperative is the defining frame for understanding youth development.*

Forum for Youth Investment (n.d.)

There are an increasing number of out of school programs which simultaneously support literacy development and development of youth voice in the ways described above. Often they have to do with connecting teens to media, music, theater, and/or technology and providing scaffolding and support so they can develop meaningful projects. These types of opportunities allow teens to craft responses to the social, political, and cultural situations they find themselves in, express important issues related to identity and communicate feelings and opinions about concerns relative to them and their communities. An example of what this type of program looks like is the Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth (DUSTY) and the DV Poetry Project in Berkeley, CA (Hull & Zacher, 2004).

These are the energies, motivations, and values upon which a positive youth engagement strategy can be built. Given meaningful opportunities to craft such a strategy— not just provide input or feedback—young people will not only build community and youth assets, but benefit from them.

### Community Readiness Factors: Pre-Requisites for Success

The literature on community mobilization points to several conditions that influence the extent to which an issue-based initiative can succeed, and the Strategic Planning Group felt that these factors should be strongly considered in selecting communities where the model will be piloted. They can be grouped as factors related to community capacity, school district capacity, and lead organization capacity. Together they represent the kind of "fertile ground" that can successfully incubate a new model.

**Community Capacity.** The Strategic Planning Group felt strongly that the selected pilot communities should have a strong infrastructure of social capital and cohesion, as well as demonstrated success in education reform and youth development. Lacking these and other conditions, the initiative would be unlikely to succeed.

Community capacity criteria include:

- Sufficient social capital and cohesion (institutions, norms, and networks that enable collective action around shared interests).
- A history of successful collaborative efforts—partnerships, coalitions, task forces, etc.—among businesses, community-based agencies and organizations, faith-based organizations, schools, and citizens groups.
- Education reform and improved student achievement are widely recognized as a collective concern and shared interest.
- The political climate fosters equity, mutual respect, and broad participation.

The shared interests of adolescent literacy development and support, education reform, and student achievement need to be articulated, promoted, and nurtured across all sectors as a prelude to developing a community-specific strategic plan.

**School District Capacity.** Another major factor influencing the success of the pilot stage is the school district. Again, if enabling conditions are not present, the relatively short term of the pilot stage will not be sufficient to create them or to overcome resistance to them. The Strategic Planning Group determined that the school district should meet the following criteria:

- The superintendent communicates a vision of, and commitment to, educational success for all students; he or she has a deep belief that success is possible.
- The district has made a commitment to education reform and improved achievement for all students, with literacy as a priority focus.
- There is a literacy action plan for all levels that includes teacher professional development around literacy instruction.
- Tutoring and other support services are available to students who need them.
- The school district involves parents and the community in meaningful ways to support student achievement.
- The superintendent has a productive relationship with the Urban League affiliate CEO, and views the affiliate as a valuable partner in reaching the district's goals.

We caution that these conditions are not fully in place in any urban community, but they must be seen as important and desirable, and the capacity to advance them through community mobilization efforts must be present.

**Lead Organization Capacity.** A critical capacity in the piloting process will be the capacity of the lead organization. The Strategic Planning Group developed a list of the essential characteristics of lead organizations, shown in Figure 7.

The chief role of the lead organization is to facilitate the development of a Community Strategic Plan for Adolescent Literacy Support and Development and then shepherd the implementation of that plan. The CEO must be fully behind and strategically engaged in the initiative, and there must be a full-time coordinator who holds a senior-level position within the affiliate and who has established relationships and credibility with other community leaders, especially those in the school district and major youth development organizations and agencies.

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### Essential Characteristics of Lead Organizations

- The mission of the organization explicitly focuses on youth development and education.
- The organization's programs directly serve significant numbers of adolescents.
- Literacy development and educational achievement are explicit priorities and are clearly reflected in programs and other initiatives.
- The organization is widely viewed as an important community asset with regard to the issues of education reform and youth development.
- The leader of the organization has a vision for, and commitment to, community development and mobilization.
- Leaders of the organization are "at the table" in planning and leading other initiatives aimed at education reform, youth development, and literacy.
- Leaders of the organization have an established, productive relationship with school district leaders.
- The organization is viewed as bi-partisan and inclusive, rather than divisive and partisan.
- The organization has a track record of "getting things done" through collaboration around shared interests.
- The organization works in a targeted area (cache area) within the larger community.
- The organization has the capacity to staff and support the initiative, including a highly-skilled, high-level "point person" who is able to build effective working relationships within all sectors.

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**Figure 7.** *Essential Characteristics of Lead Organizations*

The Strategic Planning Group strongly recommended that lead organizations be local affiliates of a national organization that is equipped to support the local initiatives through networking, developing resource materials and publicity vehicles, obtaining funding to sustain and expand the initiative, monitor progress and document impact, and provide additional credibility to the initiative through relationships with other national organizations that have local affiliates.

The Strategic Planning Group felt that the National Urban League was well positioned on both the national and local levels to serve as the intermediary organization. In the pilot stage, local Urban League affiliates will serve as lead organizations in the selected communities. A number of Urban League affiliates are ideal candidates for serving in this role. The national structure of the Urban League is another significant asset for supporting and sustaining the initiative. As has been the case in the Campaign for African American Achievement, the national office is an effective intermediary organization that can provide support for networking local initiatives; for sharing strategies and materials; and for collaborating to solve problems, develop materials, provide technical assistance, bring national attention to the issue and the initiative, support expansion to other communities, engage national partners, acquire funding for specific components of the initiative, and advocate for policy change at the national level.

A central goal of the Strategic Planning Model is to shift what currently exists as *negative* or *neutral* literacy support to *positive* or *proactive* literacy support. To do this, the coordinator within the lead organization will work “with and through” key individuals and organizations in multiple roles. In the early phases of the initiative, the coordinator will initiate and carry out, with support from the national organization and other partners, a number of activities to promote the vision, map the community, build awareness and understanding, develop the strategic plan, negotiate commitments, and facilitate partnerships and communication. Examples of such activities include:

- Gather and disseminate data on the scope of the problem.
- Meet one-on-one with community leaders to identify shared interests and provide a vision of how literacy can be included in other initiatives.
- Join other initiatives and use participation in current groups to promote the initiative.
- Make or sponsor presentations to diverse groups about adolescent literacy.
- Launch a publicity campaign with local partners.
- Convene groups for awareness, education, and commitment building.
- Develop partnerships around shared interests, with specific roles and contributions defined for each partner.
- Share the Strategic Plan, seek feedback, and build consensus.
- Bring “promising practice” examples.
- Provide information resources tailored to diverse groups and interests.
- Lead from behind: suggest strategies that others can implement.

A section of the Adolescent Literacy Community Mobilization Matrix (see Figure 5) lists a number of key strategies for leveraging action. These include:

- Providing training and education
- Providing incentives and rewards
- Developing/refocusing/enhancing programs, services, and interventions
- Developing/revising/proposing policies
- Sponsoring community forums or summits

The lead organization will at times employ these strategies directly, but over time, shift to encouraging and supporting others to employ them. This “with and through” approach builds community capacity, shared responsibility, synergy, and collaboration around a common vision and commitment.

### **Community Readiness Factors: Pre-Requisites for Success**

A critical initial strategic decision is to define geographic boundaries for the initiative. Cities are comprised of multiple geographic areas defined by service cache areas; school feeder patterns; political wards; zip codes; and neighborhoods defined by geographic features (rivers, rail lines, and highways) and ethnic groups. Determining the target area for the initiative should be based on several factors, chief among them being where the lead organization has concentrated its activities and services. Other considerations include areas where there is a high degree of overlap across sectors, and areas in which structures are already in place to support education reform, youth development, or community engagement.

The Implementation Model for the Strategic Planning Initiative is based on three distinct but overlapping phases: Readiness and Planning, Capacity Building, and Implementation. Each phase has specific objectives and outcomes, benchmarks, action plans, and evaluation procedures.

**Phase 1: *Readiness and Planning.*** During the Readiness and Planning Phase, the intermediary organization (in the case of the pilot, the National Urban League) works with the lead organization (in the case of the pilot, the Urban League affiliate in each community) to:

- Negotiate and commit to a formal agreement regarding each party's role and responsibilities in the initiative.
- Provide orientation/training to the coordinator, other affiliate staff, and key partners/advisors on the Strategic Planning Model, the Implementation Guide, and Adolescent Literacy.
- Revise/refine/adapt the Vision Statement for the local initiative.
- Do the first level of community mapping—identifying key stakeholders, major initiatives, and existing collaborative structures.
- Conduct a SWOT analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.
- Develop a Work Plan for the 3-year initiative with specific activities for Year 1, including benchmarks and evaluation strategies.

The lead organization then works with others to:

- Conduct the full community mapping process.
- Build awareness of the issue by sponsoring dialogue, providing information, targeted messages, and data to increase public knowledge and understanding.
- Work with existing collaborative structures (coalitions, networks, partnerships) whose agenda is compatible with a literacy agenda to negotiate agreements.
- Develop a sense of urgency, ownership, and commitment about the issue with organizations, institutions, and others in each sphere of influence.

**Phase 2: *Capacity Building.*** In the Capacity Building phase, the coordinator:

- Works with individuals and organizations in each Sphere of Influence to develop action plans for how they will connect more active literacy support and development to their goals, mission, and operations.
- Provides identified strategic support (e.g., training for tutors; designing and maintaining a website for the initiative).
- Convenes and facilitates meetings to support interagency planning; provides tools and templates to partners; develops a resource and contact database for the initiative.
- Develops materials, with the support of the intermediary organization, tailored to different constituencies.

**Phase 3: *Implementation.*** In the Implementation phase, initiative partners in each Sphere of Influence carry out their action plans. The coordinator continues to play a key communication role, focusing attention on progress and outcomes and alerting others to what people are doing as part of the initiative. Along with the initiative partners, the coordinator:

- Refines implementation strategies to be more effective.
- Assists partners to measure progress toward established benchmarks.
- Ensures that the initiative stays high profile in the community.

Evidence of progress and impact, based on success indicators tied to outcomes (see the Community Mobilization Matrix in Figure 3) is collected with initiative partners using initiative-wide evaluation strategies.

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The Implementation component of the Strategic Planning Model, developed through the Planning Grant, is intended to provide support and general guidelines for developing specific action plans for an urban community mobilization initiative focused on adolescent literacy support and development. The intent is that the model will be piloted in selected communities under the auspices of the Urban League affiliates in those communities. With support from the National Urban League, the local affiliates will work with multiple local partners to develop and institute strategic plans designed to make tangible differences for youth.

Several important assumptions apply to the piloting stage:

- Funding will be actively sought by the National Urban League and selected affiliates. Efforts will be made to gain support from other national and local sources, including foundations, corporations, and national and local coalitions.
- Communities that pilot implementation of the model will be selected based on the Readiness Factors.
- The lead organization for the initiative in pilot communities will be the Urban League affiliate. These affiliates will meet the criteria that have been established for lead organizations.
- The National Urban League will direct the pilot phase, and will be responsible for all development and documentation.

The piloting stage of the planning and development initiative will begin by focusing on the development of a detailed Strategic Planning and Implementation Guide that will be used to support pilot implementation of the model in selected urban communities.

The Strategic Planning and Implementation Guide will include:

- A Statement of Vision for the initiative
- Goals for Community Mobilization around Adolescent Literacy
- The Conceptual Framework
- Information about Adolescent Literacy (what stakeholders need to know)
- The Strategic Planning Model
- Indicators of Community Readiness
- Roles, Functions, and Operating Guidelines for the lead organization and initiative coordinator
- Examples of Effective Strategies (what various stakeholders can do)
- Templates for Action Planning
- Tools for Community Mapping, Tracking Activities, and Evaluating Progress
- Resources and References related to adolescent literacy, youth development, community mobilization, parent engagement, and education reform

It is expected that piloting of the implementation component of the strategic planning model will take place over 36 months in selected urban communities. The results of the pilot stage will determine whether the investments made to date in developing the model warrant further scaling up. Based on the pilot experience, the overall model will be refined and modified to accommodate a broader range of potential lead organizations that meet the selection criteria presented in Figure 7 and that have the capacity to catalyze a community mobilization effort around adolescent literacy support and development.

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The nature of the adolescent literacy issue—its causes, its impact, and its urgency coupled with the complexity of adolescent development, youth culture, the contexts within which adolescents function, and what it takes to achieve results—requires broad-based, intensive, and sustained community response. Mobilizing urban communities around this issue requires strategic and systemic action at multiple levels—from youth themselves, to the institutions that are responsible for serving them, to the sectors that are impacted by them.

The model presented in this paper is based on research on all of these dimensions of the issue and examples of the scores of initiatives that were reviewed. The process by which it was developed resulted in its validation by national experts with extensive experience in varied fields. It now exists as a resource that has a high degree of potential for proving effective “on the ground” through a pilot initiative, and for making a significant contribution to ameliorating the problem of adolescent literacy while building the capacity and assets of urban communities and youth of color.

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**Community Profiles:**

**Broward County, FL • Houston, TX • Sacramento, CA**

Summaries of Site Visits Conducted as Part of the Carnegie Corporation Planning Grant to Develop a Strategic Planning Model for Mobilizing Urban Communities to Support Adolescent Literacy Development

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## Introduction

As part of the process of developing the Strategic Planning Model, three urban communities were visited by the NUL project director and the CRM project director. The purpose of the site visits was to test initial assumptions, principles, and design ideas for the Strategic Planning Model, to gauge community readiness to mobilize around adolescent literacy, and to become acquainted with the resources and strengths of the local Urban League affiliate to determine their potential as a Lead Organization for piloting the model.

The three communities—Ft. Lauderdale, FL; Houston, TX; and Sacramento, CA—were selected by project staff and the Carnegie program officer based on a number of factors. First, we wanted to visit communities where the issue of literacy was an established priority for the community, as well as the Urban League affiliate in that community. Related to this, we wanted communities where the school systems are deeply involved in education reform. Both Ft. Lauderdale and Houston have been extensively engaged in the Campaign for African American Achievement's Read and Rise initiative, supported through grant funding from the Lilly Foundation. The Urban League CEOs and senior staff of these affiliates are well-established community leaders, and their organizations are involved in numerous youth development and education initiatives. The school districts have done much to reform secondary education.

Carnegie Corporation also wanted to select at least one community where the foundation has made a substantial investment in high school reform. Sacramento was selected on this basis, though the Urban League affiliate has not had funding there to support a large-scale Read and Rise campaign.

Site visit protocols were developed, based in large part, on the results from the first Strategic Planning Group meeting. Working through each Urban League affiliate, a two-day agenda was developed that enabled the site visitors to meet with, and learn from, key strategic leaders in the community whose support for an adolescent literacy initiative would be important. These individuals were to include school district central office staff (especially those responsible for curriculum, reading, and literacy), middle and high school principals, youth development providers, agencies that provide out-of-school education programs, and other key parties involved in addressing the educational, social, and economic needs of adolescents.

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The three site visits were invaluable in validating, refining, and expanding the conceptual framework on which the Strategic Planning Model is based, and in providing numerous examples of strategies that have proven effective. The affiliates themselves provided rich insights based on their extensive experience and the lessons learned from it.

## BROWARD COUNTY (FT. LAUDERDALE), FLORIDA

### Urban League Affiliate and Key Staff

The Urban League of Broward County (ULBC) is located in the 33311 zip code area of Fort Lauderdale, and the agency's programs and services are focused on that area. Don Bowen is the President/CEO of ULBC, and his Special Assistant, Blanche Templeton, plays a highly active role in ULBC programs and in numerous community initiatives. The Urban League is a well-established and respected community resource; and its representation on major community education and youth development initiatives is seen as highly important.

ULBC receives funding from the National Urban League through a grant from the Lilly Endowment, the purpose of which is to support the Campaign for African American Achievement. Through these resources, the organization has significantly increased its capacity, visibility, services, and involvement in literacy.

### School District

The South Central Area of the Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) includes the "Dillard Innovation Zone," which serves eight elementary, three middle, and one high school. South Central Area has its own administrative offices and staff, who report to an area superintendent. Reading and literacy are priorities for the district, which received a \$3.5M Reading First grant from the state as part of its "Just Read, Florida!" initiative. The district is also engaged in high school reform through funding from a number of sources.

### Site Visit Agenda

During the two-day visit (May 12-13, 2004), the site visit team participated in the following activities:

- Initial meeting at ULBC with Don Bowen and Blanche Templeton to learn about ULBC programs and services and to provide an orientation to the purpose of the planning grant and the Strategic Planning Model.
- Visit to William Dandy Middle School to meet with the principal (Dr. Merceda Stanley) and her leadership team, including the reading coach, and to conduct a focus group with students from the school.
- Visit to Boyd Anderson High School to meet with the principal (Dr. Timothy Gadson) and his leadership team and reading coaches. A student focus group was also convened.
- Visit to the African American Research Library to meet with the Literacy Coordinator for Broward County Libraries (Vonda Ward).

- Meeting with the Broward County Public Schools Superintendent (Dr. Frank Till), Deputy Superintendent (Dr. Earlean Smiley), and Director of Curriculum (Dr. Diane Carr) to discuss the District's reading and literacy initiatives, and how the community mobilization initiative could support them. The ULBC CEO and his Special Assistant also participated in this meeting.
- Observation of a professional development session for the BCPS High School Reading Coaches from across the District, led by the Reading Curriculum Supervisor (Dr. Debra Berlin).
- Focus group with the coaches to discuss their role, obstacles and opportunities, effective strategies, and the role of the principal in supporting reading/literacy as a priority.
- Meetings at ULBC with various staff to learn about their programs and to discuss how the community mobilization initiative could integrate with these.

### **Assessment of Community Readiness**

Broward County in general, and the 33311 zip code area specifically, represent fertile ground for piloting the Strategic Planning Model. There is strength in all of the areas specified:

- There is sufficient social capital and cohesion (institutions, norms, and networks that enable collective action around shared interests).
- There is a history of successful collaborative efforts— partnerships, coalitions, task forces, etc.—among businesses, community-based agencies and organizations, faith-based organizations, schools, and citizens groups.
- Education reform and improved student achievement are widely recognized as a collective concern and shared interest.
- The political climate fosters equity, mutual respect, and broad participation.

Moreover, the senior district administrators are committed to engaging more strongly with the community around adolescent literacy, and they intend to do this with the ULBC whether or not a pilot phase is funded.

### **ULBC's Capacity to Serve as a Lead Organization**

ULBC has all of the characteristics of a strong lead organization:

- The mission of the organization explicitly focuses on youth development and education.
- The organization's programs directly serve significant numbers of adolescents.
- Literacy development and educational achievement are explicit priorities and are clearly reflected in programs and other initiatives.
- The organization is widely viewed as an important community asset with regard to the issues of education reform and youth development.
- The leader of the organization has a vision for and commitment to community development and mobilization.
- Leaders of the organization are "at the table" in planning and leading other initiatives aimed at education reform, youth development, and literacy.
- Leaders of the organization have an established, productive relationship with school district leaders.
- The organization is viewed as bi-partisan and inclusive, rather than divisive and partisan.
- The organization has a track record of "getting things done" through collaboration around shared interests.
- The organization works in a targeted area (catchment area) within the larger community.
- The organization has the capacity to staff and support the initiative, including a highly-skilled, high-level "point person" who is able to build effective working relationships within all sectors.

Indeed, the site visit to Broward aided to the development of these criteria, as they were clearly evident in the organization and its role in the community. Don Bowen and Blanche Templeton understand the important role that they would have to play in the initiative, and are prepared to re-structure organizational responsibilities to accommodate this role.

## HOUSTON, TEXAS

### Urban League Affiliate and Key Staff

The Houston Area Urban League (HAUL) was founded more than 36 years ago, and it now serves more than 75,000 individuals annually. The main office is housed in a former bank building in a central part of the downtown area they serve; its elegant art deco architecture makes this an attractive site for many community activities. HAUL's educational and other programs are housed in separate facilities, strategically located, based on the programs and services they offer, to the adjacent neighborhoods.

The CEO, Dr. Sylvia Brooks, is an established community leader who has helped establish HAUL as a highly credible and effective partner of city and state government, education, human/youth services, and business. Jan West, HAUL's former Education Coordinator, established many of the wide-ranging educational initiatives. She now utilizes her strong relationships within the community and elsewhere to pursue funding and leverage resources. Her replacement as Education Coordinator, John Robinson, leads a strong and consistent staff of education and program specialists.

As one of the Urban League affiliates who received funding from the Lilly Endowment through the National Urban League, HAUL has fully implemented all components of the Campaign for African American Achievement and has become the model for the *Read and Rise* early literacy initiative. Through a grant from the U. S. Department of Education, HAUL developed a literacy center for parents and the community, where parents and their children, as well as day care and early childhood providers can receive training and books provided by Scholastic, Inc. Through a partnership with Houston Independent School District (HISD) HAUL has provided training on what parents can do to support reading, and has linked this initiative with the WIC program to reach out to parents and provide training. The center is staffed by an early childhood education specialist.

### School District

As the 7th largest school district in the country, HISD serves its 212,000 students through 11 area school districts that comprise one or more feeder patterns. HAUL works closely with the South Central District, which has 18 elementary, 3 middle, and 2 high schools. South Central has its own superintendent and reading team. HISD's high retention rate in grade 1 of 11% compared to 6% for the State of Florida – and the large number of students in bilingual/ESL programs (26%) has prompted a strong focus on early literacy. Funding from the Annenberg Foundation (Houston A+ Challenge) and Carnegie Corporation (New Schools for a New Society) has supported major education reform efforts.

### Site Visit Agenda

The site visit took place on April 21-22, 2004, preceded by a briefing session the evening before, during which John Robinson briefed the site visit team. The following activities took place during the visit:

- Meeting with HAUL staff at HAUL headquarters to review key educational programs.
- Meeting with Education Department faculty and director at Rice University to learn about the Center for Education's School Writing Project.
- Meeting with John Meredith, Director of Aspiring Youth (after school program).
- Meeting with the Director of Reading and Reading First Coordinator at HISD.
- Attendance at the Chevron Texaco Reading Challenge/Parents Night Out and serving as judges of the competition between teams from two junior high schools.
- Visit to Las Americas Education Center, a public charter school located in a housing project with programs for K-8.
- Meeting with the Reading Team of HISD's South Central District.
- Meeting with the Texas Southern University's Education Department Director and faculty.
- Wrap-up meeting with HAUL staff.

### Assessment of Community Readiness

The greater Houston community has invested heavily in building social capital to support and complement economic development, fueled by growth in the energy, technology, pharmaceutical fields. Despite a business cycle of "boom and bust," these infrastructure elements are solid and far reaching. Among them are the Greater Houston Community Foundation, which provided more than \$4.5M to educational projects in 2003; the Greater Houston Partnership, whose purpose is to reform K-12 education through a focus on early reading and high school reform; the Houston Automobile Dealers Association, with its "Earning by Learning" program for 4th grade students; a number of school-university partnerships; and many others.

Texas was one of the states that was at the forefront of education reform, through legislation that mandated accountability, as well as extensive school improvement support. As a decentralized school district with a strong central office infrastructure, these reforms have permeated schools and classrooms in HISD. Despite the city's size and geographic span, strong collaborations have been formed, many in which HAUL plays an important role.

### **HAUL's Capacity to Serve as a Lead Organization**

HAUL can be legitimately described as a major community asset within a community of many assets that share a common understanding of the importance of developing and enriching social capital. The organization's leaders and staff are "at all the important tables" where decisions are made and initiatives hatched. They bring credibility, energy, relationships, skill, capacity, and significant connections with the African American community. HAUL has a long history of "connecting the dots" within the community – people, organizations, initiatives, and resources – as a significant player in numerous community development activities.

HAUL's strong partnership with the South Central School District around early literacy and parent training represents a solid foundation on which to extend the focus to content-area/adolescent literacy. There is a mutually-acknowledged unity around a common purpose: to prepare students to become self-sufficient, productive members of society.

The broad range of HAUL programs underscores the substantial contribution that the organization makes in the Houston community. They include:

- IBM-sponsored, "Watch Me Read" lab at HAUL that engages pre-K through elementary children in reading activities and learning about computers. Children from day care centers are invited with their providers to come to the lab, and elementary school children can come after school.
- GE DreamMakers Project that assists new middle school students to make the transition from elementary school and develop the skills to prepare them for admission to college. The program includes enrichment sessions using corporate mentors, field trips, character building activities, and parent workshops.
- Positive Black Males Association, a non-profit grass roots association dedicated to changing the minds and beliefs of young black males from age 5 to 19.
- Workforce Development Department Success Now II, which offers professional services to employers and applicants seeking employment, with funding from the Texas Workforce Commission and includes partners such as the Houston Area Galveston Council and corporate sponsors.
- AT&T Digital Campus – Technology Education and Access Centers: HAUL is one of 10 in the nation supported with computers and funding to support workforce development through training in computer/information technology skills, customer service, and legal documentation services to meet the priority demands of Houston employers. A database of jobs available for applicants and of qualified applicants for jobs, corporate training, and job fairs are part of this initiative, which is endorsed by the Mayor and City Council, state legislators, HR association and others.

## SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

### Urban League Affiliate and Key Staff

Dr. James Shelby is the veteran CEO of the Greater Sacramento Urban League, and during his tenure in that position, he has forged scores of partnerships with businesses and other organizations which have provided extensive support to the League and its programs. These relationships have been fostered in part by GSUL's focus on workforce development, and the organization is seen as a major source of trained workers for specific job categories (e.g., call center operators).

The staff of GSUL includes a high proportion of job trainers, GED teachers, and technical staff needed to maintain the high-tech infrastructure. There is no Education Director or education outreach person.

### School District

GSUL identifies most closely with the Grant Joint Unified School District, which is located near the organization's headquarters, while Sacramento Unified School District serves the more densely urban sections of Sacramento. Grant Joint Unified is a middle and high school district whose feeder schools are in the communities of Del Paso, Robla, Rio Linda, and North Sacramento. The Sacramento County Board of Education is considering a re-organization plan that would unify the feeder pattern within Grant Joint Unified.

### Site Visit Agenda

The site visit was held on May 25-26, 2004. The following activities comprised the agenda:

- Meeting with the President/CEO and key staff:
  - Executive Vice President for Fiscal and Program Management
  - Director of Technology and Program Manager for Adult Programs
  - After-School Program Coordinator
  - Job Developer
  - Instructors in the GED, Call Center, Financial Literacy, and Technology programs
  - Case Manager
- Meeting with the Associate Superintendent of the Grant Joint Unified School District, the district in which GSUL is located
- Meeting with the Education Department staff from California State University, Sacramento
- Meeting with the Director of LaFamilia Counseling Center
- Meeting with the Education Leadership program faculty from American River Community College
- Visit to Foothill Farms Junior High School, Grant Joint Unified School District and meeting with the principal and school board member
- Visit to the CSUS Bilingual Multicultural Education Center and meeting with department faculty
- Visit to LaFamilia and discussions with staff

### Assessment of Community Readiness

Although Sacramento is experiencing a time of great flux with regard to education reform and state and local political issues, it is a vibrant and resource-rich community. While some collaborative structures seem more motivated by "enlightened self-interest" than a commitment to the common good, many positive developments have occurred nonetheless.

### GSUL's Capacity to Serve as a Lead Organization

Although GSUL is a strong organization with substantial capacity related to its mission, a number of obstacles would have to be overcome to create the conditions necessary for success in piloting the Strategic Planning Model. First, the relationship between the CEO and Superintendent has been seriously damaged as a result of GSUL's pursuit of a charter to operate a school. Though this was three years ago, and GSUL has not yet opened the school, there is no contact between these two important leaders. Second, many members of the immediate community around GSUL's new building have not yet become comfortable coming in; many perceive the building as either a corporate headquarters or state building. Limited outreach efforts have been made to overcome this perception. Third, the focus of GSUL's programs is heavily on workforce development, and the population it serves is primarily young adults (either high school graduates or dropouts). Although a stronger focus on literacy would benefit this population, the capacity to accomplish this is limited, since GSUL has not had external funding (i.e., a Lilly grant) to fully implement the Campaign for African American Achievement. Finally, the CEO tends to focus his relationship-building efforts on the business community far more than the human service community. He indicates that GSUL competes with other organizations for funding, and that this has created wariness and alienation.

Based on the above, the Strategic Planning Group and project staff have determined that Sacramento would not be a promising site for piloting the Strategic Planning Model.