

# Reading's Ripples of *Change:*

A New Culture of  
Shared Responsibility



PREPARED BY THE  
HARWOOD INSTITUTE FOR  
PUBLIC INNOVATION

WRITTEN BY  
RICHARD C. HARWOOD,  
MICHAEL PRIHODA,  
OLUWAGBEMIGA DASYLVA,  
AND JOHN CONROY



The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation  
4915 St. Elmo Avenue, Suite 402  
Bethesda, MD 20814

**phone** 301-656-3669  
**email** [info@theharwoodinstitute.org](mailto:info@theharwoodinstitute.org)  
**web** [theharwoodinstitute.org](http://theharwoodinstitute.org)

**The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that equips people, organizations, communities, and networks with the tools to bridge divides, build capacity, and tackle shared challenges. The Harwood Institute's work is rooted in a philosophy of Civic Faith and the practice of Turning Outward. Founded in 1988, the Institute's approach has spread to all 50 states across the U.S. and 40 countries around the world.



Berks Alliance  
1100 Belmont Avenue  
Reading, PA 19610

**phone** 610-376-1576  
**email** [info@berksalliance.org](mailto:info@berksalliance.org)  
**web** [berksalliance.org](http://berksalliance.org)

**Berks Alliance** is a community development organization committed to building a strong and vibrant community in Berks County and Greater Reading. Founded in 2015, the Alliance collaborates with anchor institutions, including major employers, educational institutions, and healthcare providers, to foster a clean, safe, and green environment. Berks Alliance focuses on improving the health, wealth, and educational attainment of the community, ensuring an adequate supply of living wage jobs and a workforce to fill them.



Centro Hispano Daniel Torres Inc.  
201 Penn Street  
Reading, PA 19601

**phone** 610-685-1265  
**email** [info@centrohispano.org](mailto:info@centrohispano.org)  
**web** [centrohispano.org](http://centrohispano.org)

**Centro Hispano** is a 501(c)(3) community benefit organization dedicated to serving the Latino community in Greater Reading. It offers a range of programs and services focused on education, health, addressing food insecurity, and social service support to help individuals and families thrive. Centro Hispano aims to break down barriers of access by bridging cultural gaps and promoting inclusivity within the community.



United Way of Berks County  
25 N. 2nd Street, Suite 101  
Reading, PA 19601

**phone** 610-685-4550  
**email** [unitedway@uwberks.org](mailto:unitedway@uwberks.org)  
**web** [uwberks.org](http://uwberks.org)

**United Way of Berks County** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving lives and strengthening communities in Berks County. United Way brings together people, organizations, and resources to tackle the most pressing challenges facing our community. United Way focuses on education, financial stability, health, and basic needs, ensuring that every individual and family has the opportunity to thrive. Founded in 1925, United Way of Berks County has been a cornerstone of community support and innovation, impacting thousands of lives each year.



The Wyomissing Foundation  
960 Old Mill RD  
Wyomissing, PA 19610

**phone** 610-376-7494  
**email** [info@wyomissingfoundation.org](mailto:info@wyomissingfoundation.org)  
**web** [wyomissingfoundation.org](http://wyomissingfoundation.org)

Founded in 1926, **The Wyomissing Foundation** is a private foundation that uses its resources to serve as a catalytic agent, creating community impact in the Greater Reading community through strategic grantmaking. The organization also provides thought leadership on critical community issues, develops and supports place-based coalitions and engages in community-wide collaborations and initiatives.



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Written by **Richard C. Harwood, Michael Prihoda,  
Oluwagbemiga Dasyuva, and John Conroy**

Research by **Alfred Delena, Gabby Levet, John Conroy,  
and Oluwagbemiga Dasyuva**

Edited by **Tristan Wood**

Design by **Dresden Branding & Design**

Photography by **Berks Weekly, Centro Hispano, East Penn,  
Go Greater Reading Visitors Center, Goggleworks, Jonathan  
Harwood, Literacy Council, Reading Area Community College,  
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# Introduction

The people of Reading, Pennsylvania are coming together to do something remarkable. At a time of deep divides in America, when so many communities are beset by mistrust, a loss of hope, and growing inequities and disparities—when so many communities are in search of a new path forward—the people here are actively claiming greater control over their lives and futures.

The progress in Reading is a hopeful sign for other communities that want to know if—and how—they can take intentional steps forward to discover a new future where everyone in the community can thrive.

It can be done. It is being done in Reading.

## A New Agenda for Education

Just over ten years ago, a *New York Times* cover story declared Reading the poorest community in the United States. Once predominantly White, today it is more than 65% Latino.

In early 2021, Centro Hispano—a local Reading organization focused on strengthening families through

advocacy, education, and engagement—and The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation forged a partnership to engage the community in creating a community-driven education agenda to address key issues and strengthen Reading’s civic culture.

Months of conversations with residents and in-depth interviews with leaders from across the community led to a nine-point educational equity agenda, which is documented in The Harwood Institute’s report, *Reading Thriving, Together: A New Agenda for Education and the Community*.

When the report came out, four local organizations—Centro Hispano, United Way of Berks County, Wyomissing Foundation, and Berks Alliance—stepped forward to fund and lead the next phase of the work. They all knew each other but had never marshaled their collective resources to spearhead an initiative before.

Then in summer 2022, over 50 local residents and leaders attended Harwood’s *Getting Started* Public Innovators Lab to learn the Turning Outward approach to catalyzing community-led change. During the Lab, three action teams formed to

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Today, just two years later, each team has unleashed a chain reaction of actions that is creating both change on education issues that matter to people and strengthening the community's civic culture.

focus on education agenda items that were ripe for new action—English as a Second Language, After- and Out-of-School Activities, and Early Childhood Education.

Today, just two years later, each team has unleashed a chain reaction of actions that is creating both change on education issues that matter to people and strengthening the community's civic culture. At a time when so many community initiatives seem to stall out or fade away, Reading is creating real systemic change by taking a different approach.

*Reading's Ripples of Change* is a progress report and a roadmap for growing and accelerating change over time. Consider the following:

- Where people once saw seemingly intractable challenges—including a youth violence crisis, widespread mental health challenges, language barriers, and a lack of access to early childhood education—today action is being taken on all of these fronts

and is now jumping to new areas of concern in the community, producing real, tangible gains.

- Where people once described fragmented organizations marked by competition and operating in silos, today there is a growing network of leaders and groups who have shifted from just getting together to working together with a new shared purpose.
- Where people once felt neither seen or heard—or even included in community life to begin with—today people from various backgrounds and who speak different languages and dialects say they feel a new sense of belonging and possibility.
- Where people once saw deep divides across neighborhoods, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and language, and between and among institutions and organizations, today people are increasingly crossing these dividing lines and building a community grounded in shared responsibility.





None of the efforts you will read about in this report depended on new investment to get going. Instead, the community started by tapping into its innate capacities and resources. Yet over time, these actions did attract new resources that are enabling the community

to deepen progress. Meanwhile, as the work has spread throughout the community, hundreds of individuals and scores of organizations have joined in the effort and are now working together in new ways.

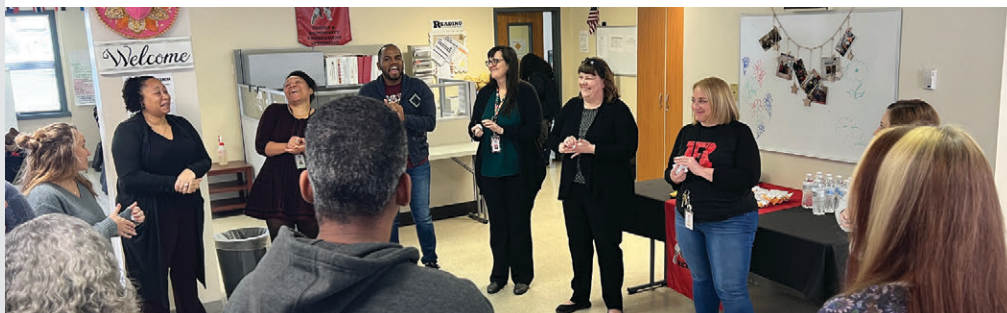
# Chain Reaction Snapshots

## ESL TEAM

### ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) TEAM

The English as a Second Language team began with the assumption that the community just needed to take advantage of existing programs. Yet by Turning Outward to the community and each other, they realized they needed to expand language learning opportunities and increase accessibility to available opportunities. Ripple effects quickly followed.

A once-dormant coalition sprang back to life. Organizations and groups that had previously operated in silos—even in competition—forged new ways of working together. In response to a genuine call, community members stepped forward ready to contribute as language instructors. English as a second language class offerings increased. Practice dinners created new, safe spaces for learning and fostered a new sense of belonging. Rather than fizzle out, the work accelerated, jumping to new networks—from the faith community to the arts community to workforce development. Then more employers got involved. And people increasingly sought to learn Spanish. Language learning was no longer contained to specific pockets of the community. It became a true priority and was embraced *throughout* the community. One team member summed up the new collaborative spirit taking hold in Reading by saying, “If we’re all working in tandem, it doesn’t matter where people go. They’re going to get an English language learning experience that’s top notch.”





## ASA TEAM

### AFTER- AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES (ASA) TEAM

A highly-competitive and survival-focused orientation defined Reading's after-school activity providers in the past. But in just a couple of years, a transformation has occurred. Sparked by what they learned in Harwood's *Getting Started* Lab, the team decided this effort was going to go further than just getting together. They were going to *work together* on behalf of Reading's youth and families to accomplish far more than they could in isolation.

The impact has been more profound than a mere increase in after-school programming. A once-fragmented ecosystem of after-school activity providers is now working together in mutually reinforcing ways and efforts have spread to a number of unexpected areas. The team has created better mental health support for youth. Innovative approaches to preventing violence. Safe places for youth to go after school. New opportunities for youth leadership. And a growing sense of safety and connection among neighbors. A once-frayed civic culture is being strengthened, day by day.

## ECE TEAM

### EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) TEAM

By holding themselves accountable for really listening to the community's aspirations, the Early Childhood Education team challenged their assumptions and made a strategic U-turn that changed Reading's trajectory on early childhood education. The team showed immense humility to admit what they thought they knew was off target. And enormous courage to pivot to align to what the community needed.

Out went the notion that addressing early childhood education challenges could be solved simply by increasing programs and services. In came a newfound determination to engage the community differently. Doing so uncovered critical insights and produced new opportunities at every turn. The impact of their teamwork is palpable. The team has set a trajectory toward a future where early childhood education is not just accessible, but also deeply valued and embraced by the community. And along the way, the team has strengthened community bonds and tangibly shifted Reading's civic culture.

# How Civic Culture is Shifting

IN 2022:		TODAY IN 2024:
Residents did not feel seen or heard and leaders routinely took action based on what they assumed the community needed.	▶	Engaging residents is becoming a widespread norm and more leaders are relying on public knowledge from the community to shape efforts.
Fragmentation and silos were common.	▶	Community leaders and organizations increasingly work together rather than just get together.
Organizations and groups often competed over scarce resources.	▶	Organizations and groups marshal collective resources to act on a shared purpose.
Native Spanish speakers struggled for inclusion in community life.	▶	A new sense of belonging is spreading throughout the community.
Youth were disengaged from community life.	▶	Youth lead in new ways and take greater ownership over the community.
A negative narrative prevailed.	▶	The community is creating a new, can-do narrative.
Shared purpose did not exist.	▶	There is a growing sense of shared purpose.
Community efforts often stalled out.	▶	The work is growing and being sustained.



## An Antidote to America's Culture Wars

Notably, the Reading community produced its education agenda at the height of culture war debates raging across the nation over critical race theory, school board recalls, and book-banning efforts.

At the time, everyone said education was too divisive an issue around which to create a shared purpose. But Reading demonstrated that education can be used to bring a community together rather than divide it.

Some people also doubted that Reading had the capabilities or wherewithal to move forward. It was a community in danger of being left out and left behind.

But the changes documented in this report are meaningful and systemic. They directly impact people's lives, and the life of the community. They show that Reading, and communities like it, can create a more promising future by forging a new civic path forward.

## From "The Waiting Place"/"Impasse" to "Catalytic"

In 2021, glimmers of progress were already evident in the community. In *Reading Thriving, Together*, a resident noted there is "so much to be hopeful about" in the community, with another calling it a "place of opportunities." People named initiatives like the United Way's Ready.Set.Read! early literacy

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This movement—from “The Waiting Place”/“Impasse” to “Catalytic”—demonstrates remarkable progress in just a couple of years.

program, downtown redevelopment, and an encouraging pandemic response from organizations like Olivet Boys & Girls Club, local nonprofits, and the hospital system.

Yet overall, people described a community that was stuck.

In The Harwood Institute’s framework *Community Rhythms: The Five Stages of Community Life*, every community is in one of the five stages, and each stage has fundamentally different implications for where a community is and how it can most effectively move forward. People in Reading reported that the community was somewhere between “The Waiting Place” and “Impasse” stages.

Communities that find themselves where Reading started this work are at odds. There’s clarity about “what’s wrong,” but little agreement on what to do. A lack of trust, a missing sense of shared purpose, and limited leadership and organizational capacity hinder the community’s ability to get things done. In Reading, while progress was being made in some areas, the community had



a history of initiatives that had started and stalled. *Reading Thriving, Together* documented this reality.

Yet through courageous, persistent efforts, the community has squarely moved into the early “Catalytic” stage, the third stage of readiness for change. Here, there are growing numbers of pockets of change emerging and the number of people and organizations stepping forward increase by the day. The stage is set for more widespread growth and vibrancy. This movement—from “The Waiting Place”/“Impasse” to “Catalytic”—demonstrates remarkable progress in just a couple of years. The community should take great pride in this.

Now, it is time for Reading to build upon this progress.







# The Five Stages of Community Life

In over 35 years of research and on-the-ground initiatives in communities across the United States and in other countries, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation finds that change happens in stages over time. We have developed the Five Stages of Community Life framework that captures how this change happens and what it looks and feels like in a community. Each of the five stages has its own implications—do's and don'ts—for creating impact. By understanding which stage it is in, a community can develop strategies, programs, and actions that fit its local context and can then work intentionally to accelerate and deepen positive progress.

## The Waiting Place

There is an inkling that something is off in the community, but people can't name it. There's no agreement on issues, problems, or aspirations. A disconnect exists between leaders and community.

## Impasse

The community is at loggerheads. There's clarity about "What's wrong," but little agreement on what to do. A lack of trust, leadership and organizational capacity block the community's ability to get things done.

READING, PA, 2021



To learn more about the Stages of Community Life, see *Community Rhythms* by The Harwood Institute for the C. S. Mott Foundation

### Catalytic

There are pockets of change emerging, with new ways of working together. But a lack of trust, leadership and organizational capacity still plague the rest of the community. A new competition arises between an ingrained negative narrative and a new can-do narrative.

### Growth

There is an abundance of community capacity, networks and productive norms for getting things done. Community-wide efforts are making progress.

### Sustain and Renew

Clear progress has been made on key issues, but questions about “What’s next?” are arising. Often there are underlying tensions on unresolved systemic issues. Tensions between old and new leaders exist.

READING, PA, 2024



## An Intentional Strategy

At issue in 2021 was how Reading could reach a more promising trajectory with increasing momentum and ever-expanding civic confidence.

Over the past 35 years, The Harwood Institute has learned that it is essential to meet a community where it is—not where we wish it might be. Wishful thinking does not help to address real challenges like language learning opportunities, a youth violence crisis, or intergenerational poverty.

Communities regain their health and vitality by growing new efforts and renewing their strength over time. These

efforts must be rooted in what matters to people, and these efforts must be largely shaped and created by the community itself.

Short-term wins must be coupled with longer-term gains. People need to see progress being made along the way if they are to engage for the long haul—especially if they are to believe it is possible to come together to get things done.

The seedbed for this growth is the development of strong, positive underlying community conditions—including trusted leaders, organizations and groups that span dividing lines, productive norms of engagement, and a



can-do narrative. When these conditions exist, a community can accelerate and deepen its progress.

This is the intentional strategy underway in Reading. It is producing results—both by addressing the issues that people care about and forging new underlying community conditions that enable change to take root, grow, and spread.

Truth be told, most communities take a fundamentally different course, pursuing a set of activities that takes them in a direction that fails to produce the progress they hope for. This is what The Harwood Institute typically sees happening in communities across the country:

- Far too many community efforts overpromise and under-deliver, thus deepening people’s sense of frustration, even cynicism, and leading to lost hope.
- Comprehensive plans get designed that are too big for a community to take on, and they fail to realistically take into account the capacities and needs of a community.

- Strategies are imposed upon communities from outside—lacking critical local context and undermining people’s sense of local ownership.

- Large sums of money are expended long before anyone has a clear-eyed view of where investments are most needed and what it takes for those investments to succeed.

Over and over again, there is an unspoken assumption at work: You can “fix” a community and its problems. As if people and their community somehow need to be fixed. As if persistent issues of belonging and a lack of opportunities can somehow be easily solved.

But no community nor its people can be fixed. Communities regenerate themselves by coming together and marshaling their resources, often in unexpected ways. It is never possible to know exactly where people’s efforts will lead or what ripples they will create, but a community can be proactive about setting the right conditions for this emergence to occur. It is what The

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“I thought this was another initiative that would come and go. I know it’s early, but I have come to deeply believe in this work. We’re doing something real here.”

Harwood Institute calls “planned serendipity.” This approach is unfolding in Reading.

## A Place You Want to Be

During a meeting in early 2024, members of Reading’s three action teams reflected on the past couple of years and the progress they had made. Rich Harwood, President and Founder of The Harwood Institute, asked them, “What are you creating together?”

Answers flowed freely, quickly. Pride. Belief. Trust. New relationships. Systemic change. One man, an early skeptic of the work, said, “I thought this was another initiative that would come and go. I know it’s early, but I have come to deeply believe in this work. We’re doing something real here.”

This is the story of people from different parts of a community beginning to see and take action on issues that matter to people and bringing together existing resources in ways no one could have



foreseen or predicted. It’s also the story of how a few initial change agents created ripples that spread and grew over time.

Perhaps most of all, it is the story of Reading’s changing narrative. As one Public Innovator said during the work, “Reading used to be a place for people to flee. Today, it’s a place you want to be.” ■

# The Reading Story

Real, lasting change is taking hold in Reading. It is the result of multiple efforts woven together toward a shared vision. This transformation did not come easy. Nor did it happen overnight. Instead, it required intentional actions, taken over time, that focused on what mattered to people in the community.

Three distinct teams have driven this progress over the past few years, addressing key issues and strengthening Reading's civic culture each step of the way. Rather than working in isolation, each team's actions are contributing to an interconnected effort aimed at building a community that works for everyone who calls Reading home, not just some. What follows is the story of these three teams and the ripple effects they set in motion.

At the end of each team's section, you will find an illustration of their story so you can see how that particular story evolved over time. To help you navigate, segments of each story have been numbered, and you can find the corresponding numbers in the different



illustrations. This is to help you track how that part of the story played out and how that part relates to the overall development of the story. A final combined illustration shows how the teams' interconnected efforts rippled across the community.

To download and print copies of each team's ripple effects illustration, scan the QR code below:



**SCAN TO  
DOWNLOAD**

# Reading's English as a Second Language Team

As Reading's population dramatically changed in recent decades, the need for people to learn English as a second language intensified. Local providers were thus not surprised when English as a second language emerged as a key agenda item in *Reading Thriving, Together*. Following the *Getting Started* Lab, an English as a Second Language (ESL) team formed—including leaders from Wyomissing Foundation, the Literacy Council, Berks Latino Workforce Development (Tec Centro), Calvary United Church of Christ, Reading Public Library, and Reading Area Community College—with the intention to build on the good work that already existed.

The team set out in mid-2022 to better understand the community's shared aspirations and concerns regarding English as a second language. They discovered four actionable themes across nine community conversations with residents: 1) many saw learning English as a pathway to full participation in community life; 2) fragmented information made navigating current programming difficult; 3) people desired safe, comfortable environments

to practice English outside of formal classes; and 4) the community needed more English as a second language programming and resources to meet current demand.

The team's first step was to share this public knowledge with potential allies—community leaders, educational institutions, cultural organizations, and nonprofits—who could help move things forward. The result? The team rapidly expanded as people stepped forward to join the initiative. Moreover, these conversations led to an important discovery—while some organizations had long waiting lists, others had capacity to serve more students. Meeting current demand as expressed in the community conversations would take more than simply expanding English as a second language offerings. They needed to increase *accessibility* to available opportunities.

But where to start? The team didn't immediately launch a new program or initiative, even if those became essential to their success over time. Instead, they picked a doable step to

increase the community's access to existing resources. A chain reaction grew from there.

This is the story of Reading's ESL team, the actions they took, and the ripple effects that were unleashed. As you read the story of Reading's ESL team, recall that each of the numbered sections below corresponds to sections of the illustration that follows this story.

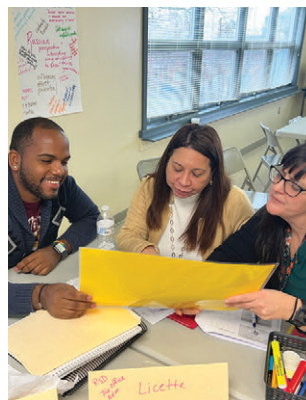
## 1

One of the first people to step forward following the *Getting Started* Lab was the head of the Literacy Council. To break down existing silos, he sought to revitalize the long-dormant English as a second language coalition—a group of providers who started meeting in 2015 but had dwindled over time and ceased altogether during COVID. “We all got busy doing our own thing,” one member recalled. The head of the Literacy Council rallied Tec Centro

Berks, Reading Area Community College, Reading Public Library, and others to begin meeting regularly again, grounding them in the knowledge they gathered from the community. As the coalition discussed how to make English as a second language resources more accessible, they realized that providers themselves did not know what different organizations offered.

This realization catalyzed the team to create a resource directory containing information on classes, locations, schedules, and support services from providers across the community. The team designed the resource directory as a one-stop shop for both providers and community members. Providers could finally see who offered what and where gaps remained. This transparency paved the way for additional collaboration. Now, “If an organization has individuals that they can't help, they can send them somewhere else,” a team member said. Meanwhile, for the first time in the





community's history, those in need of language education and support had one central location to find the resources they needed. To ensure the directory remained updated and relevant, a team member from Reading Area Community College volunteered to train providers in keeping their listings current.

Creating the directory was an important starting point as it brought previously disparate information under one roof and increased access for community members. But the team knew the directory's mere existence was insufficient. The community didn't know it existed yet. Therefore, the team connected with United Way of Berks

County to add this resource to their 2-1-1 Helpline database so people in search of classes could be directed to what was available. The library then stepped forward to deepen their role as a community connector. They had their employees take Spanish classes so they could better explain available resources in Spanish—including the directory—to community members. Meanwhile, other members of the team created and distributed physical flyers with QR codes that led community members to available classes.

The team began to simultaneously address another challenge as all of this took place. Prospective language

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learners often faced barriers—time constraints, work demands, childcare issues, and waiting lists—that got in the way of signing up for and attending classes. The team knew they couldn’t address all of those challenges at once. But they focused on what they *could* do to more quickly build momentum: tackle waiting lists.

Considering possible solutions, the team explored how existing providers handled waiting list challenges. One team member from Mother Veronica Resource Center shared that the Center only offered one class per year; their waitlist regularly exceeded 100 people. To kickstart learners’ English as a second language journey, the Center offered waitlisted students the option to use a language learning app to help them practice language skills. While various providers in the community had been using language learning apps already, the Center’s example inspired other team members to more intentionally engage their waitlisted students. For example, the Literacy Council expanded its app usage to serve up to 100 students from just a few dozen previously. Meanwhile, the team kept working to increase class offerings that could ultimately eliminate most waitlists.

Local providers were effectively expanding opportunities. But they were also transforming the nature of their relationships—in essence, *how*

“We are recognizing each other’s strengths and complementing each other much better than we were.”

*they worked together.* Never before had they marshaled resources on such a community-facing project. Where fragmentation and even competition previously ruled, an ethic of true collaboration was starting to take hold. One team member described this shift by saying, “We are recognizing each other’s strengths and complementing each other much better than we were.”

Creating the resource directory ultimately crystallized three insights for the team:

- Too few classes existed to meet current demand;
- More locations to host classes were needed; and
- More instructors needed to be trained to teach additional classes.

The team would turn their attention to addressing these three areas next as part of their larger efforts.

## 2

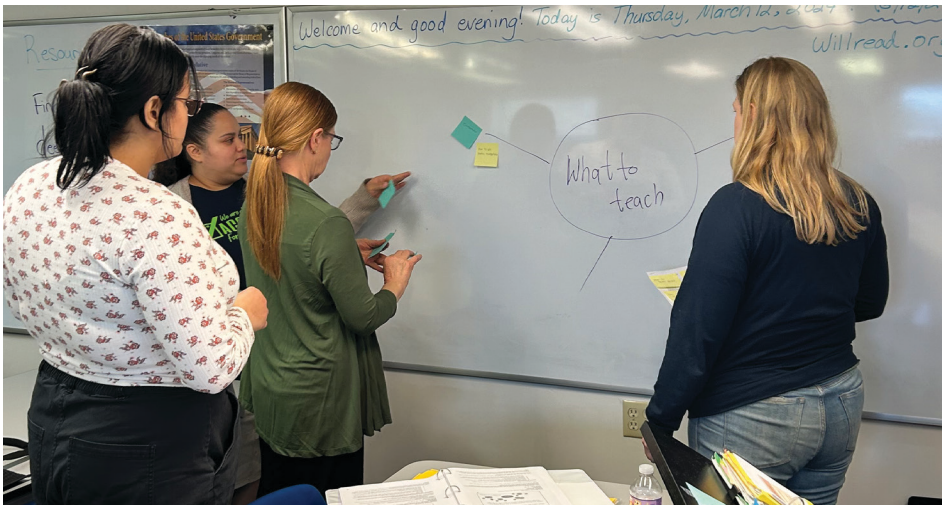
Many English as a second language classes in Reading are taught by volunteers, not paid instructors. The Literacy Council runs the community's signature instructor training program, called English Forward, which had long struggled to find enough volunteer instructors. But now, with a revitalized coalition and renewed partnerships, the Literacy Council used the various communication channels and relationships of different team members to put out a widespread call for volunteers. Never before had providers come together as a collective to push volunteer recruitment.

Importantly, the resource directory made clear the need for additional classes and instructors. This clarity allowed the team to show prospective volunteers

that they could make a direct impact right away. In response, community members stepped forward to be trained as instructors—enough to support new and existing classes.

Volunteers came from the local college, retired teachers, and individuals from various parts of the community. Enlisted by their fellow community members, these new volunteers saw how they could create a stronger, more inclusive community by supporting language learning. The community was beginning to prove to itself that it had the innate resources and talent to thrive together.

While the number of volunteers expanded, other members of the team kept exploring new class locations. They focused on cultivating a deeper relationship with the Reading School District, which had the physical space





to host classes. These relationship-building conversations—framed by the community’s aspirations—paid off. In fall 2023, Reading School District and the Literacy Council partnered to launch 12 new English as a second language classes in school buildings across the district. A team member said this was “the first time” these classes were offered in district facilities.

This new, mutually reinforcing relationship helped establish education as a shared community responsibility. But progress didn’t stop there. In addition to offering classroom space, the Reading School District sponsored instructor training for district educators, admin, and support staff. The district then went one step further and committed to paying their staff—rather than depending on them as volunteers—to teach these classes in district buildings after school hours. Ultimately, families could now access classes taught by people they knew in a trusted, comfortable setting. The existence of English as a second language classes

in district buildings led families to increasingly see the Reading School District as a community hub.

Building on the success of the Reading School District adding classroom space, another big breakthrough came as the Literacy Council shared the continued need for classroom spaces with their key partners. Dominoes quickly fell as numerous groups—including those outside of Reading—responded to the Literacy Council’s entreaty by offering space for new classes. These groups included Governor Mifflin School District, Wilson School District, Muhlenberg School District, the Salvation Army, and various churches across Reading and Berks County.

The end result was more profound than just the existence of new classroom spaces; the wider community was wrapping its arms around language learning success like never before. And it was made possible when a collection of groups chose to work *together* rather than in isolation.

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### 3

A key theme from the team's community conversations was that people desired a safe space to practice English outside of formal classes to strengthen language skills and forge new connections. Looking to address this issue, one team member from Calvary United Church of Christ came up with the idea of hosting a practice dinner at his church.

Guided by Harwood's mantra of "Starting small to go big," he scheduled just one dinner to start. He had two goals: help people learn English and foster deeper connections between native-English and native-Spanish speakers in the community. He also designed the event with a few principles in mind. Serve food for a more relaxed setting. Provide childcare to increase accessibility for families. And engage people beyond his congregation to draw a range of English and Spanish speakers.

The first practice dinner in June 2023 drew dozens of community members. Attendees shared that it gave them a rare opportunity to bond with other families and offered a newfound sense of connection. The experience was so powerful that other faith leaders in attendance immediately wanted to replicate the event. The original ESL team member responded by creating a simple guide to catalyze other churches in hosting their own practice dinners.

Ever since that first event, dinners have become a regular monthly occurrence, rotating between various churches across the community. Faith leaders continue to create more opportunities for people to engage in these kinds of spaces to this day. The team member who started the practice dinners said, "It has gotten momentum and snowballed in a really good way. The dinners are well attended. Other churches are opening their doors."

The first few practice dinners sparked other groups beyond the faith community to join in. Goggleworks, a community art center, put a unique spin on a practice dinner in February 2024. They made the event a cross-cultural art experience, drawing over 75 community members. It was the biggest practice dinner yet.

Then Tec Centro, a local workforce development organization, held their own practice dinner. But instead of bringing food in, students in their culinary program prepared the dinner and also participated in the event. It was so well received that they immediately crafted plans to incorporate these dinners into their regular programming. Beyond making progress on the community's desire for safe practice spaces, something important was happening. A growing ecosystem of unlikely partners was forging deeper relationships and ways of working together, united by a shared purpose to bridge language divides and foster deeper connectivity.

Momentum continued to build from there. Another ESL team member, who happened to volunteer as an instructor, saw an opportunity to host more regular, smaller-scale gatherings for intensive language practice. He launched weekly practice sessions at his church for a group of his students. Hearing about these weekly practice sessions, yet

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Reading's ESL team orchestrated a chain reaction that is leading to a new sense of belonging for English learners.

another community member—who had not formally been part of the team up to that point—stepped forward to replicate that for his students but to make it virtual.

What started as a single dinner has now spread across the community, jumping networks from the faith community to the arts community to workforce development. Through intentional actions, Reading's ESL team orchestrated a chain reaction that is leading to a new sense of belonging for English learners as they become more a part of Reading's community life.

#### 4

The team also engaged major employers in Reading with their public knowledge. This sparked another insight: Language barriers hindered both organizations' overall success and their employees' ability to achieve individual career goals.



One employer, East Penn Manufacturing (East Penn), had long sought to equip their employees with the language skills needed for success. Prior collaboration with the Literacy Council had helped but not gone far enough in relation to the number of employees engaged. These previous efforts had laid the groundwork for further action now.

Efforts to increase the supply of classes and trained instructors paved the way for East Penn to double down on an employee benefit: English as a second language classes held onsite either before or after shift changes. To make it easier for employees to participate, East Penn now pays employees for an hour of each two-hour class. This move expanded English learning opportunities for East Penn's employees. But East Penn didn't stop there. They also made their decision visible, promoting it in the community as a key component of workplace culture. This led Tower Health and Alpek to offer a similar

employee benefit, with Reading Area Community College providing onsite English as a second language classes at their workplaces.

This new culture of language learning in the workplace proved infectious. English-speaking employees across Reading's major employers increasingly wanted to create a deeper sense of belonging between cultures. Many started voicing a desire to learn *Spanish*. Multiple employers, including East Penn, responded by offering Spanish classes to their employees.

Bringing language learning into the workplace is leading to stronger cross-cultural bonds. People are seeing and hearing each other across the language divide in new ways. The community, led by some of their longest-standing employers, is demonstrating that language diversity is a community builder rather than a weakness to overcome. The ESL team began with

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Language diversity is a community builder rather than a weakness to overcome.

the assumption that the community just needed to take advantage of existing programs. Yet by Turning Outward to the community and each other, they realized they needed to expand language learning opportunities and increase accessibility to available opportunities. Ripple effects quickly followed.

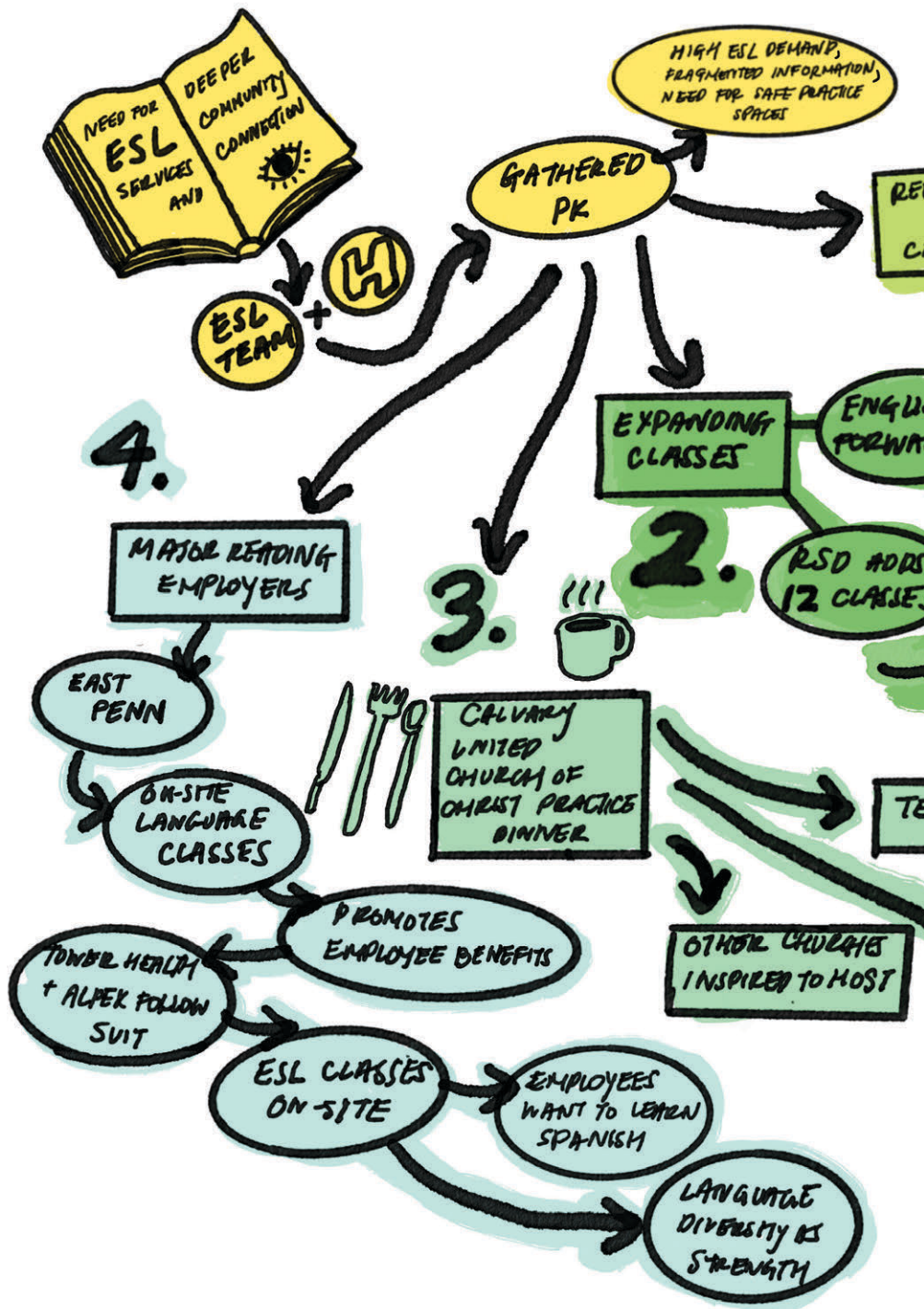
A once-dormant coalition sprang back to life. Organizations and groups that had previously operated in silos—even in competition—forged new ways of working together. In response to a genuine call, community members stepped forward ready to contribute as language instructors. English as a second language class offerings increased. Practice dinners created new, safe spaces for learning and fostered

a new sense of belonging. Rather than fizzle out, the work accelerated, jumping to new networks—from the faith community to the arts community to workforce development. Then more employers got involved. And people increasingly sought to learn Spanish. Language learning was no longer contained to specific pockets of the community. It became a true priority and was embraced *throughout* the community.

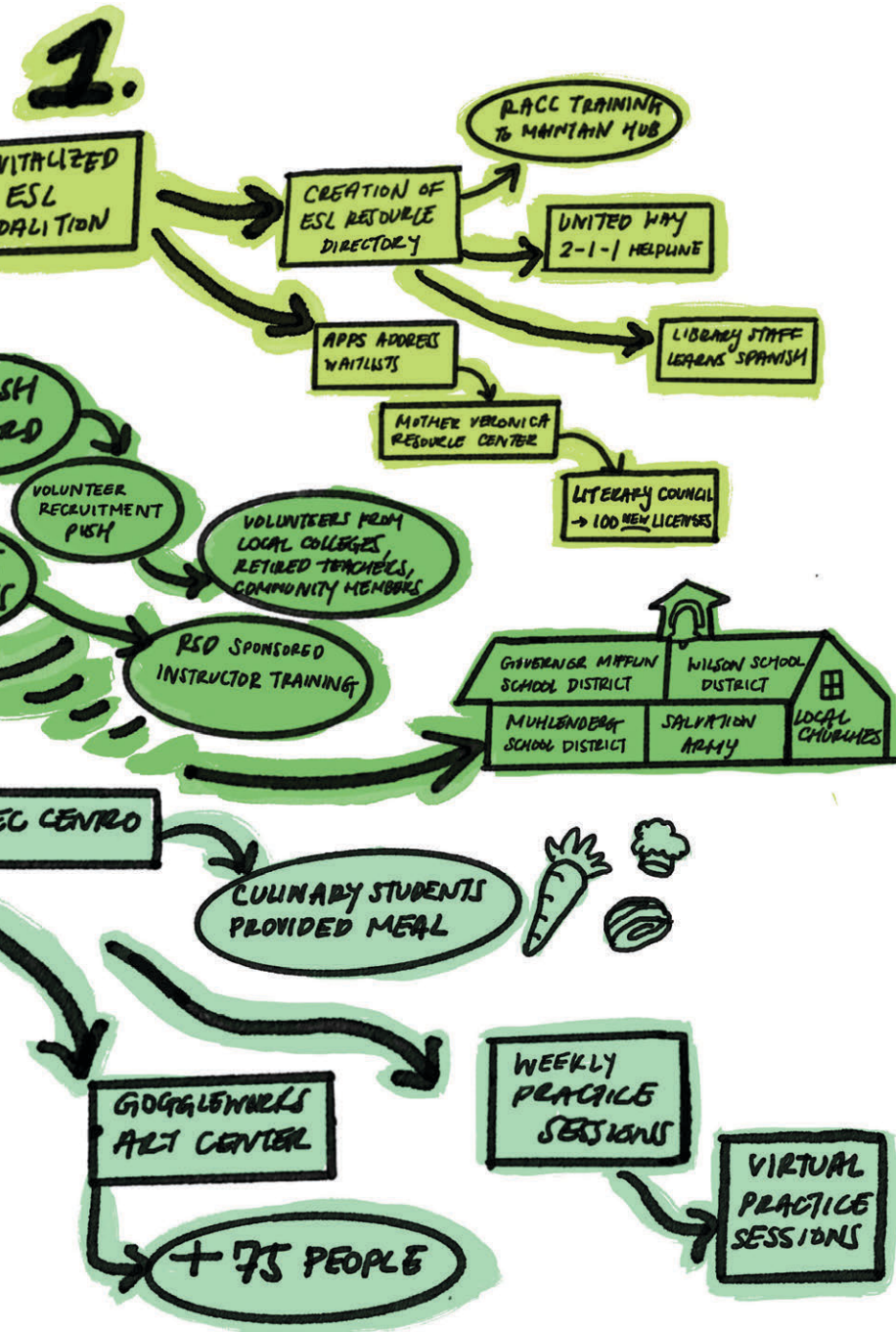
One team member summed up the new collaborative spirit taking hold in Reading by saying, “If we’re all working in tandem, it doesn’t matter where people go. They’re going to get an English language learning experience that’s top notch.” ■







# ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE



GE (ESL)







# Reading's After- and Out-of-School Activities Team

Prior to the Harwood initiative, the landscape of after-school activities was fragmented and struggling to meet the needs of youth and families in Reading. Organizations, even those with similar goals, often operated in isolation. Disjointed efforts and competition over limited resources were common. Many smaller organizations were “always competing for dollars.” Larger organizations were focused on expanding their individual work. Meanwhile, families and young people struggled to access the opportunities and mental health resources they needed to thrive.

Coming out of the *Getting Started* Lab, an After-School and Out-of-School Activities (ASA) team formed with a vision for working together in more mutually-supportive ways. The team initially included representatives from Centro Hispano, Olivet Boys & Girls Club, the YMCA, the Reading Recreation Commission, Communities in Schools, VoiceUp Berks, and the Berks Community Action Program. Most of the organizations already knew each other,

though few had actually worked together in the ways they would come to through this work.

The team held 15 community conversations to connect with a broad range of both parents and students. These produced three overarching themes that built on the initial Harwood report: 1) families wanted safer schools and a safer community, 2) youth needed more mental health support, and 3) youth needed *more engaging activities* after school, not necessarily more programming.

Gathering this public knowledge sparked an essential insight for the team. Current after school activities were not aligned with the community's shared aspirations. The team realized they needed a fundamental mindset shift if they were going to make real progress. Simply *getting together* to discuss community needs wasn't going to move the needle. They needed to start actually *working together*.

This epiphany meant the team needed to enlist more allies before taking action if they were to be effective. They also

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Instead of creating a new program, they looked to embed better practices within existing programs by tapping into something already in motion.

needed to shift the norms by which they worked together, which to date had been holding them back. So they engaged others working in the after-school space with the express intent to catalyze a shift from competition to collaboration. Their efforts succeeded.

This is the story of the ASA team, the actions they took, and the ripple effects that were unleashed. As you read the story of Reading's ASA team, recall that each of the numbered sections below corresponds to sections of the illustration that follows this story.

## 1

Reading's youth needed more mental health support, in part due to the area's longstanding history of intergenerational poverty and youth violence. COVID-19 only exacerbated this challenge among youth with approximately one in five Pennsylvania high schoolers having considered suicide per the Centers for Disease Control. The need came through loud and clear during the team's community conversations. But the reality was that the topic of mental

health still carried a stigma for much of the community, not to mention barriers such as cost and access. After-school providers were unsure how to break through the stigma among youth and families in a culturally-responsive way. New training and tools were needed for providers to more actively and effectively address the mental health needs of youth.

The team needed a small, actionable starting point to avoid getting overwhelmed by the complexity of the problem. Instead of creating a new program, they looked to embed better practices within existing programs by tapping into something already in motion.

Prior to the *Getting Started Lab*, VoiceUp Berks had received a grant for Question Persuade Refer (QPR), a suicide prevention program that trains adults in best-practice interventions. As VoiceUp Berks began work related to the grant, they realized they needed to train both English- and Spanish-speaking "interventionists." But they had no one on staff who could train people in

Spanish. New relationships from their participation on the ASA team enabled them to find a partner to fill this gap. Centro Hispano stepped forward by having a member of its team trained as an interventionist. Now VoiceUp Berks offers this suicide prevention training in both English and Spanish to dozens of adults working in after-school programs. This was a crucial step to better serving youth.

Meanwhile, the team kept seeking ways to provide more robust mental health support for youth. They found out Berks Community Health Center was offering free trauma-informed care training for local professionals to equip them in helping students navigate trauma in more productive ways. Numerous members of the team took advantage of this training to keep strengthening their capacity and skill around meeting students' mental health needs.

Emboldened by these early successes in building capacity, the ASA team, with Centro Hispano as lead applicant, submitted a grant proposal to the

Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development's Office of Crime and Delinquency in late 2023. One piece of this \$800,000 grant aimed to provide free trauma-informed care training to community members. The team hoped to enlist parents, guardians, and youth themselves in creating an ecosystem of youth mental health support. They received the grant. Team members attribute this major win to them being Turned Outward toward the community, the proposal being aligned to the community's aspirations, and stronger relationships between and among providers. The grant is in motion and will activate parents, guardians, and youth as stewards of youth mental health support.

All the while the team had also been at work engaging students. Historically, VoiceUp Berks and Yocum Institute, an arts nonprofit, hadn't crossed paths. But they developed a strong relationship as ASA team members. Together, they created a youth theater initiative to empower teens to tell their own stories about navigating mental health. Teens

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Together, they created a youth theater initiative to empower teens to tell their own stories about navigating mental health.



are actively collecting stories from other youth and are in the process of creating an original theatrical piece that they will perform publicly. One youth participant, interviewed for a local news story from the *Reading Eagle* about this work, expressed the importance of the initiative: “Everybody experiences good and bad parts of mental health. The first step is to start destigmatizing it and have people start talking about it.”

The team’s efforts around mental health ultimately engaged providers, families, and students. By starting small, forging strong relationships and partnerships, and capitalizing on unexpected opportunities, this team is building an ecosystem of mental health support that is essential to youth well-being. In the process, they are creating a culture of collaboration over competition.

## 2

In February 2023, Centro Hispano partnered with the Reading Film Office, the City of Reading’s Youth Commission, and Reading School District for a special Black History Month film series. The series successfully engaged local youth by celebrating and embracing the community’s diversity and allowed the team to connect with families about after-school resources and activities.

Soon after, the Reading Office of the Mayor had put out a call for local nonprofits to submit creative proposals for youth violence prevention programs. With Centro Hispano’s building right across the road from the IMAX, Centro Hispano saw an opportunity to apply for this grant by turning movie nights into an ongoing after-school activity geared toward teens and their parents. Their grant application detailed how they

aimed to take movie nights to the next level by serving a meal, engaging youth and families with activities and resources offered by community partners, and then walking over to the IMAX for a free movie.

Due to this innovative and collaborative approach, the city awarded Centro Hispano a grant to hold these movie nights every two weeks through the rest of 2023. Called “Knights at the Movies” to play off Reading School District’s mascot, the initiative provided a safe place for kids to go on a regular basis. It also led to something serendipitous. “We started to see whole families coming to the event,” a Centro Hispano leader noted, “which made the initiative intergenerational in a way we had no idea would happen.”

Youth then started voicing a desire to take a leadership role in the movie nights. Teenagers didn’t just want to

be attendees; they wanted to lead in planning and implementing the events. So the ASA team supported the formation of a Youth Advisory Group. Made up of about a dozen students, this group took ownership over organizing and spreading the word about movie nights in innovative ways through Instagram, during school announcements, and through the “Remind” app. The group also chose the movies, created special themed evenings, and planned the games and activities. For example, at a summer 2024 showing of the movie *Twisters*, the Reading Science Center led tornado-themed science experiments.

While movie nights had already been successful, youth being involved unleashed new impact. Attendance quickly doubled, with Centro Hispano’s capacity regularly maxed out. For perhaps the first time outside of a school



setting, these youth were leading a community initiative. They experienced new senses of inclusion, belonging, and ownership. “It has been a great experience,” shared one teen. “Every movie night was full of joy and fun, especially the Christmas one, which was amazing to plan. Helping out was really fulfilling.” For providers, seeing the success unfold initiated a mindset shift to seeing youth as key partners in creating community change. It also reinforced the power of starting small—with a single movie night—and growing their efforts over time into an initiative that became intergenerational and led by the community’s youth.

As the grant from the city wound down at the end of summer 2024, the team worried about being able to continue the movie nights and the sustainability of its work with the Youth Advisory Group. But using evidence of their success with youth and families, they crafted a compelling application for more sustainable support from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development’s Office of Crime and Delinquency. They received the grant and even attracted additional financial support from the FirstEnergy Foundation. Knights at the Movies marches on, led by the Youth Advisory Group.



### 3

Historically, Reading has struggled with youth violence, including many youth being involved in gang activity. The Reading School District experienced a surge in youth violence during the 2022-23 school year. Multiple schools experienced lockdowns due to the threat of gun violence and the high school saw a spike in fights on campus. For many, it felt like one of the remaining few safe places—the local schools—were spiraling out of control.

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For perhaps the first time outside of a school setting, these youth were leading a community initiative.



Penn State Berks—a campus of Penn State University—had formed a Youth Anti-Violence Coalition in early 2023 in response to a surge of violent incidents across the community. While on a Zoom call one day, members of the ASA team realized they comprised a good chunk of the coalition’s active participants. One of them, a certified Harwood Catalytic Guide, saw an opportunity to accelerate their collective effort by embedding a Turned Outward approach in the coalition’s work.

Members of the coalition first mapped the community to identify “violence hotspots” to pinpoint where new efforts were most needed to create a safer community. With this data in hand, the coalition connected with the Reading Recreation Commission to establish “safe corridors” in one neighborhood around Halloween 2023. They recruited volunteers to patrol designated safe zones encompassing local parks and

the surrounding neighborhoods.

The initiative proved successful, with numerous families saying they felt safe and supported during a fun holiday tradition.

This success with the trick-or-treat safe corridor led the coalition to use a similar approach around local schools. They identified multiple incidents of students being hit by cars near one of Reading’s middle schools. To address this area of concern, the coalition trained community members as peacekeepers and violence interrupters and stationed them around the middle school to create a safe corridor. These paid peacekeepers assisted with street crossings and helped maintain a safe environment for students during arrival and dismissal. Amid a renewed sense of safety around this middle school, adults and kids alike have reported reductions in bullying and unsafe student behavior.



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Efforts in this area are strengthening the community so that youth and their families can exist without fear and begin to rebuild connections with their neighbors.

Efforts to create these safety corridors continue to spread. One ASA team member—herself a principal at an elementary school in a different part of Reading—is working to establish a safe corridor stretching from her school to a nearby middle school. All the while, the groups spearheading these safe corridors in different parts of Reading are sharing their successes and learnings to better accelerate and expand similar community-led safety efforts. The team plans to expand the scope of “safe spaces” beyond a particular event or school by recruiting residents to place decals in their front windows to signal that those in need can find help within. While a seemingly small gesture, the decals literally signal to youth that they are supported by the community and have safe havens when in need.

Little by little, the ASA team’s efforts in this area are strengthening the community so that youth and their families can exist without fear and begin to rebuild connections with their neighbors. This work is helping make

public safety a common enterprise in Reading, supported and cultivated by the entire community, not just left at the feet of law enforcement. Yet again, small actions were adding up to tangible shifts in Reading’s civic culture as the very norms and narratives at play in the community began to change in positive ways.

#### 4

During initial community conversations, many parents expressed a desire to foster a deeper sense of connection and support among themselves. In response, a team member enlisted two active parents to establish and lead a Parent Circle. One was a member of the local school board, while the other was a social worker. The Parent Circle—a new, recurring space—gave parents a safe setting to build relationships and support one another. The group also provided the team with a source of ongoing public knowledge about parents’ and families’ aspirations. One theme that this group reinforced from

earlier community conversations was parents' consistent struggles navigating after-school programs for their children.

A couple of years ago, it would have been impossible for the team to tackle such a challenge. The sector was just too fragmented. In fact, a previous similar effort to coordinate a program directory stalled out. But after-school providers now had a much stronger ethic of working together. So they leveraged their new relationships to streamline information and improve access to opportunities by creating an a shareable slide deck of available summer programs.

Next, the team made flyers with QR codes directing people to the website. Then they took these flyers out into the

community, directly into families' hands. Various team members also spread the word about this new resource to their listservs, newsletters, and networks. Providers had rarely, if ever, shared information so willingly to connect families with potential competitors in the space. But they were betting that a rising tide would lift all boats. Sure enough, youth participation in summer programming rose across the board.

Working in tandem with the Youth Anti-Violence Coalition, the team next plans to include year-round programming in this resource hub, not just what is available in the summer. This effort includes the creation of an interactive digital map that will display K-12 after-school activities from throughout the community to further increase access for families. By replacing competition with cooperation, providers are benefitting. So too are families, as they can finally navigate a previously fragmented system.

## 5

The team continues to strengthen and broaden its efforts by applying this more collaborative approach well beyond their initial focus areas. For example, Communities in Schools and Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU) were both applying for federal grants to bring after-school programming back into elementary and middle schools in five of

**FREE Parent Circle**

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- February 7
- May 1
- March 6
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- April 3
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GoggleWorks 6PM-8PM

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“

A couple of years ago, it would have been impossible for the team to tackle such a challenge. But after-school providers now had a much stronger ethic of working together.

Reading’s highest-need neighborhoods. Centro Hispano engaged each group to share what they were learning from their Harwood work, which enabled both groups to be more aligned to the community in pursuing these grants. As a result, Communities in Schools and CCIU received the funding to bring after-school activities back to schools in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, these organizations teamed up with the Reading School District to address youth food insecurity by providing free daily meals to 1,000 students in these programs.

Work between Communities in Schools, Reading School District, and Centro Hispano did not stop there. Since families often talked about schools as a safe place, they next sought to engage parents alongside youth during these after-school programs. That led Centro Hispano to pair their evidence-based Opening Doors program—a national program that equips parents to be their child’s first educator—with Communities in Schools’ youth

programming held at Reading School District buildings. Now after-school programming engages youth *and* parents at the same time, in the same place, and in an unprecedented way. This was only made possible because, as one partner noted, “Each organization brought their strengths to bear.”

Centro Hispano as an organization is transforming how they work with the community. With support from the ASA team, they are in motion to strengthen the Youth Advisory Group created for Knights at the Movies by transitioning it into a formal Youth Advisory Council. The council will inform the entirety of Centro Hispano’s work—involved in organizational decision-making and



designing and leading youth activities beyond Knights at the Movies. Centro Hispano is also in the process of hiring a Youth Coordinator for the first time in their history to guide this initiative. These efforts are demonstrating to youth that they are not just the leaders of tomorrow; they can be leaders today. As one teenager said of their participation on the Youth Advisory Group, “It gave me a sense of purpose. I wasn’t just sitting at home, stuck on my phone. Instead, I was able to connect with others and step out of my comfort zone.”

Moreover, Centro Hispano’s Turned Outward approach is helping them secure new federal and state dollars for the community. They have been awarded a federal grant for \$250,000 to support the continuation of their Opening Doors program and a \$250,000 state grant to deliver senior care services within the Hispanic community. This broader impact and investment was all made possible by embracing a different way of doing business—one that makes a priority of Turning Outward and centering the community’s aspirations.

A highly-competitive and survival-focused orientation defined Reading’s after-school activity providers in the past. But in just a couple of years, a transformation has occurred. Sparked by what they learned in Harwood’s *Getting Started* Lab, the team decided this effort was going to go further than just getting together. They were going to *work together* on behalf of Reading’s youth and families to accomplish far more than they could in isolation.

The impact has been more profound than a mere increase in after-school programming. A once-fragmented ecosystem of after-school activity providers is now working together in mutually reinforcing ways and efforts have spread to a number of unexpected areas. The team has created better mental health support for youth. Innovative approaches to preventing violence. Safe places for youth to go after school. New opportunities for youth leadership. And a growing sense of safety and connection among neighbors.

A once-frayed civic culture is being strengthened, day by day. ■

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These efforts are demonstrating to youth that they are not just the leaders of tomorrow; they can be leaders today.



SILDS  
COMPETITION  
FRAGMENTATION



ASA  
TEAM

GATHERED  
PK

NEED FOR  
COMMUNITY  
SCHOOL

2.

CENTRO + FILM OFFICE  
+ YOUTH COMMISSION +  
SCHOOL DISTRICT + BERKS CAP  
+ NAACP

ASA TEAM GET  
MAYOR'S OFFICE  
GRANT

"KNIGHTS AT  
THE MOVIES"

TRAUMA-INFORMED  
TRAINING FOR PE

INTERGENERATIONAL  
PROGRAMMING

CREATE YOUTH  
ADVISORY GROUP

MOVIE NIGHT  
SELF-DEFENSE

3.



PENNSYLVANIA  
BERKS

YOUTH  
ANTI-VIOLENCE  
COALITION

"SAFE  
CORRIDOR"  
AT MIDDLE SCHOOL

"SAFE  
CORRIDOR"  
AT ELEMENTARY

MAPPED  
VIOLENCE  
HOT SPOTS

TRAINED  
COMMUNITY  
PEACEKEEPERS

NEW SENSE  
OF SAFETY

REDUCED BULLYING  
+ UNSAFE BEHAVIOR

RECREATION COMMISSION  
+ COALITION "SAFE  
CORRIDOR" FOR TRICK-  
-OR-TREAT

VOLUNTEERS PATROL  
SAFE ZONES

4.



PARENT  
CIRCLE

NEW SOURCE  
OF PK

PARENTS  
STRUGGLE TO  
NAVIGATE  
PROGRAMS

TEAM CREATES  
PROGRAM HUB

INCREASED  
STUDENT  
PARTICIPATION

AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITY (ASA)





# Reading's Early Childhood Education Team

The years before kindergarten play a pivotal role in shaping a child's future success and development. In many ways, this period determines whether or not kids grow up to achieve their full potential. Pre-K resources already existed in Reading prior to the Harwood initiative, though they only reached a small portion of families in need. When the Harwood report came out, it underscored the community's growing need to make early childhood education a community-wide priority.

After the *Getting Started* Lab, an Early Childhood Education (ECE) team formed with representatives from United Way of Berks County, Centro Hispano, Reading Public Library, Berks Alliance, Early Learning Resource Center, and Berks County Intermediate Unit. The team believed the community's biggest need was more resources, services, and programs geared toward young children. In other words, they thought the biggest challenge lay on the supply side.

The team started with 11 community conversations to gather public knowledge about the community's aspirations. In reviewing what they

gathered, they felt there wasn't much new that they had learned and remained convinced the biggest need was scaling up and expanding existing and new programs. Yet with guidance from Harwood coaches, they took another look at what the community was actually saying.

"That's when the switch flipped," one team member stated. Digging deeper sparked a crucial insight. Addressing the challenge before them wasn't just a matter of increasing the availability of programs or resources. For starters, many families were unaware of the importance of early childhood education for their children. Others feared the cultural stigma attached to seeking help as doing so felt like signaling that you were unable to provide for your family. Further, "We found that families think education starts when kids go to school. We had to break that myth," explained one team member.

Simply put, the team realized their original assumption was way off track. They did not need to focus, first and foremost, on scaling up programs. Instead, they needed to work with the

community to establish the value and importance of early childhood education. Otherwise, current programming and resources would not reach the very families who might benefit most.

So the team made a full strategic U-turn. To serve more kids, they would have to engage parents first. In the words of one team member: “We had to meet them where they are.”

This is the story of Reading’s ECE team, the actions they took, and the ripple effects that were unleashed. As you read the story of Reading’s ECE team, recall that each of the numbered sections below corresponds to sections of the illustration that follows this story.

## 1

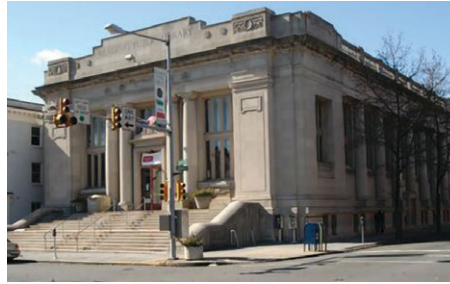
The team started by taking stock of existing resources. Could they be adapted to more effectively engage the community? Enlisting community members for their initial community conversations reinforced that information had to be short, digestible, and bilingual to break through with busy parents. Current materials were overly complex and too often just in English. So they created a new line of visually-attractive, bilingual materials, including social media graphics, hand-outs, and a stand-up display for tabling that featured key early childhood education facts and



benefits. These new materials enabled the team to begin effectively meeting residents “where they are.”

Meanwhile, others on the team sought to engage families in person. But first they had to figure out how to effectively do this. Starting with the entire Reading community seemed too ambitious and unrealistic. So instead, living out one of Harwood’s Key Mantras, they “started small to go big,” and selected the 11th & Pike neighborhood to get started. The family-oriented neighborhood had a thriving park with summer sports





leagues and was adjacent to a branch of the Reading Public Library. By choosing somewhere ripe to engage families, the team was betting they could quickly generate progress and spread their efforts to other areas over time.

The ECE team started by showing up in the park to meet families at their kid's soccer practices. They drew families in with child-friendly activities and book giveaways before handing out their newly-designed materials. They also engaged parents with Harwood's ASK Tool, a simple set of four questions that get people to name their aspirations for community life. While this more personal approach took time and energy, they knew building trust was an essential precursor to more fully sharing the value of early childhood education and ultimately supporting families with services. And they knew trust was built best by getting into the community and making themselves visible. As one team member said, "At first, people were kind of skittish. They didn't know what we were doing or whether we were selling

something. But after a couple of weeks, we started seeing the same people. There was a recognition that this wasn't a one and done. These people are coming out every week."

Connecting with parents in this way led to an unexpected discovery. Despite the library being next to the park, a team member said, "We learned how underutilized the library is in that neighborhood. Many parents were not even aware that the library was less than a block away from the park we were standing in." Many had no idea about the library's numerous programs and services for young children and families. So the team revised their materials again to highlight the library's family events, such as early childhood story time. Families became partners in this work, and started pointing the ECE team to where else they could engage families. The team began distributing info at trusted local businesses around the 11th & Pike neighborhood, including bodegas, hair salons, and convenience stores. Doing this further deepened the

# READING PUBLIC MUSEUM



EXIT ONLY

EXIT ONLY



team's relationships in the community. The team was no longer expecting families to come to them; they were going where families naturally go.

This array of activity led to the library inviting the ECE team to partner on their “Cops with Cones” event—an ice cream social at the library for families to build relationships with officers, learn about the value of early childhood education, and explore available opportunities. “We were able to share information similar to what we did in the park. 200 people showed up for ice cream with the Reading Police Department,” related one team member.

These early efforts were beginning to make a difference. Yet the team knew that for the community to more deeply value early childhood education, people needed to be engaged through multiple channels, with regularity, over time. Simply put, the team knew they needed to consistently interact with more people in more ways. To supplement in-person engagement and further get the word out, the team made a series of “Make Learning Fun” videos about the value



and importance of early childhood education. They've continued posting regularly on social media and YouTube ever since, generating thousands of views. One video, a guide to doing an art project that teaches fine motor skills to toddlers, even went viral, accumulating over 125,000 views.

These initial steps became possible only because the team paid closer attention to what the community was actually saying and not what they expected or wanted to hear. This commitment to Turning Outward reoriented the

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The team was no longer expecting families to come to them; they were going where families naturally go.

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These initial steps became possible only because the team paid closer attention to what the community was actually saying and not what they expected or wanted to hear.

team from simply working to increase programs and services to engaging families on the lifelong value of early childhood education. Along the way, the team’s efforts were also changing the way providers interacted with the community. Providers began to see that truly supporting families meant going beyond providing services. It also entailed helping parents understand the importance of early childhood education and the opportunities available. Yet these early strides to better engage families were just a prelude to the positive impact to come.

## 2

The ECE team had noted a recurring theme from their community conversations: Families kept talking about public movie nights being hosted by the Reading Recreation Commission in different parts of town. The team saw an opportunity to create something similar in the 11th & Pike neighborhood to build a stronger sense of connection among neighbors. So members of the

team from United Way reached out to the Reading Recreation Commission and quickly established a partnership to host movie nights in 11th & Pike starting in summer 2023. Families came out in droves, appreciating the chance to engage in a free, safe, and fun event during the summer. “I believe it created a sense that, ‘We as community members own this park,’” noted a team member.

Beyond providing a place for community connection, movie nights became another way for the team to engage families around early childhood education. The team set up a resource table, gave away books, and planned kid-friendly activities before each movie. United Way continued funding movie nights through summer 2024 and hopes to make them a summer staple moving forward.

By joining forces on movie nights, United Way and the Reading Recreation Commission addressed an aspiration of families—building deeper connections with their neighbors—and created



another opportunity to engage families about the value of early childhood education. Movie nights further accelerated the team's overall efforts as word of mouth spread in 11th & Pike about the folks who kept showing up at the park. And it marked another step forward in how the team engaged families as they established a stronger community norm of providers meeting families where they are instead of expecting families to come to them.

### 3

The ECE team sought to forge more partnerships in their quest to increase the importance of early childhood education in the community. In thinking about who else could be allies for engaging parents, they shared public knowledge with medical providers due

to their high levels of community trust and the important role they play in families' lives.

The team focused on obstetricians in particular because of their unique interactions with new mothers. One team member said, "It was a room full of people who started having aha moments that, 'We're the first ones to meet the baby when we deliver it. So why wouldn't we be more concerned about what happens after they're born and when they come in for their follow up appointments?'"

Eventually, a United Way volunteer heard about the ECE team's work and stepped forward to coordinate a three-day book fair in partnership with the local health system. Members of the ECE team set up a table so they could

engage families around the importance of early childhood education. Moving forward, the team plans to share resources at an upcoming flu clinic to interact with families en masse yet again. Conversations with medical providers continue as the team seeks to further activate this sector in connecting families to early childhood education resources.

All told, the team will reach a multitude of new families through these efforts and accelerate community access by meeting families where they are.

#### 4

Having experienced firsthand the transformation from aligning with the community's aspirations, the team sought to bring other early childhood education providers on the same journey. To start, they connected individually with other groups and organizations. Initial conversations were promising, but the team realized they could move faster if they convened the entire sector at once. Collectively, through this work, the team had built the relationships to make this happen.

As a result, an ECE team member's organization stepped forward to host a forum called "Creative Early Childhood Education Initiatives." The forum's goal was to begin catalyzing a reorientation in the early childhood education space around the importance of engaging families in new ways. During the event, the team shared their journey of reframing their purpose. Furthermore, the team highlighted positive early wins from their efforts. As one team member likes to note, "Success breeds success." Lifting up tangible progress helped enlist allies and activate a new way of thinking about work in the sector.

Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC), a multi-county supporter for local childcare providers who had been on the team from the beginning, came out of the forum inspired to more intentionally engage families around their needs and aspirations. To do this, ELRC adapted Harwood's ASK Tool for their intake process. "Previously, we might have asked, 'Do you need help with anything else?' Now, we've trained our staff to ask, 'What are your hopes for your family?'. This shift leads to deeper connections

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“Previously, we might have asked, 'Do you need help with anything else?' Now, we've trained our staff to ask, 'What are your hopes for your family?'.”



and conversations,” shared an ELRC leader. ELRC also started incorporating the team’s resources into their physical and digital mailings that go out to multiple counties in the region.

This new approach to engaging community members also spread to the Growing Readers program, a longstanding partnership between United Way, Reading Area Community College, and ELRC. Established in 2017, the program trains and credentials prospective educators to work in an early learning center. It also provides coaching and professional development for childcare centers interested in pursuing Keystone Stars accreditation. Through the Harwood initiative, the partnership has increasingly centered families’ aspirations when engaging childcare providers. By focusing conversations around shared goals that deliver on



families’ aspirations, these partners and the wider sector are discovering a deeper, more collaborative way of working together that continues to strengthen the community’s civic culture.

## 5

Back in 2018, Penn State Health College of Medicine received a federal REACH (Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health) grant to improve health outcomes in Berks and Lebanon Counties. At the time, United Way worked with Penn State to engage residents in Reading’s Oakbrook public housing community around their needs and concerns related to healthcare and employment. In 2023, Penn State was awarded another REACH grant, but this time the focus area expanded to include early childhood education.



The team saw renewing the relationship with Penn State as a chance to expand access to early childhood education and strengthen community connections beyond the 11th & Pike neighborhood. United Way and Penn State joined forces again, this time equipped with the new approach for engaging people and catalyzing change. Together, the ECE team and Penn State are undertaking a door-to-door survey in Northeast Reading to give residents a chance to talk about their lived experiences and for the team to share early childhood education resources. Notably, the ECE team embedded ASK Tool questions into the survey to center residents' aspirations for their community rather than just their challenges.

The survey is underway and on-track for completion in fall 2024. Along the way, the team will invite families engaged through this survey to community conversations at the public library. By Turning Outward and constantly seeking new opportunities, the team expanded their work outside of 11th & Pike and continued to build wider access to early childhood education opportunities. The new trajectory of hope that the ECE team set in motion continues to build.

None of what you've read so far would be possible without that original U-turn in strategy. By holding themselves accountable for really listening to the

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None of what you've read so far would be possible without that original U-turn in strategy.

community's aspirations, the ECE team changed Reading's trajectory on early childhood education. The team showed immense humility to admit what they thought they knew was off target. And enormous courage to pivot to align to what the community needed.

Out went the notion that addressing early childhood education challenges could be solved simply by increasing programs and services. In came a newfound determination to engage the community differently. Doing so uncovered critical insights and produced new opportunities at every turn.

The impact of their teamwork is palpable. The team has set a trajectory toward a future where early childhood education is not just accessible, but also deeply valued and embraced by the community. And along the way, the team has strengthened community bonds and tangibly shifted Reading's civic culture. ■

EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION SERVICES  
ONLY REACH PART  
OF COMMUNITY



ECE  
TEAM

ASSUMED NEED  
ON DEMAND SIDE

GATHERED  
PK

U-TURN  
NEEDED!

NEED TO  
BUILD  
VALUE +  
ACCESS

1.

NEW BILINGUAL  
MATERIALS

ENGAGE  
COMMUNITY  
AT PARK

"COPS WITH  
CONES" AT THE  
LIBRARY

11TH & PIKE

BOOKS AT  
CORNER STORES,  
THE LIBRARY

NEW AWARENESS  
OF LIBRARY  
RESOURCES

2.

EDUCATIONAL  
VIDEOS

ONE GOES  
VIRAL!  
125K+  
VIEWS



UNITED  
+ REACH  
COMM

5.

PROJECT  
REACH

TEAM + PEAK  
STATE

DOOR-TO-DOOR  
SURVEY UNDERWAY

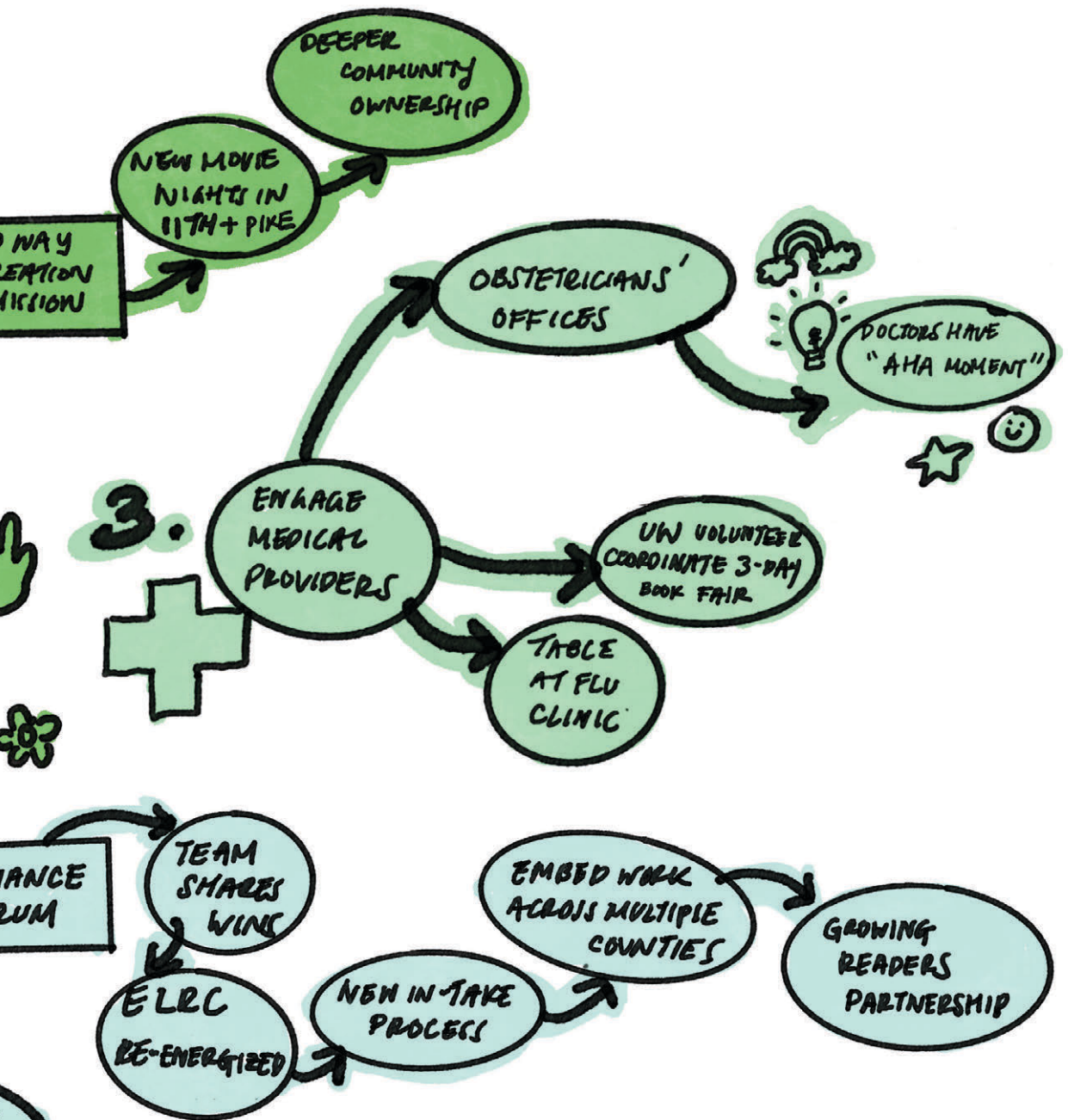
EMBEDDED  
HARDWOODS  
ASK TOOL

4.

BERKS ALL  
ECE FOR

NEW COMMUNITY  
CONVERSATIONS  
PLANNED





EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE)











# Conclusion

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There are steps a community can take to accelerate and deepen its movement firmly into the Catalytic stage and grow and sustain its future. This is the task before Reading.

In just two short years, Reading has made remarkable progress. As noted in the introduction, the community has moved from in between “The Waiting Place”/“Impasse” to the early “Catalytic” stage in The Harwood Institute’s Five Stages of Community Life.

In the early Catalytic stage, there are a growing number of pockets of change emerging, and the number of people and organizations stepping forward is increasing. This is often the most exciting stage for a community, where new ideas, new efforts, and new hope take root, grow, and spread. Think of it as the “innovation stage.”

There are steps a community can take to accelerate and deepen its movement firmly into the Catalytic



stage and grow and sustain its future. This is the task before Reading. Here are five key actions:

## 1. Grow the chain reactions

The community has successfully grown a whole series of chain reactions of actions and ripples over the past two years through the efforts of the three action teams. To move forward, the community should:

- Build on the wins in each key area of English as a second language, after-school and out-of-school activities, and early childhood education. While progress has been made, it should not be taken for granted.
- Continue to invest in these chain reactions over time to deepen progress. It can be easy—tempting, even—to move on to the next new initiative or program. But doing so may leave behind efforts that require continued nurturing, support, and attention.
- Be intentional with time and energy. Some specific efforts in a given chain reaction may naturally fizzle out. Their main purpose may have been to help get Reading on a better trajectory. In the early “Catalytic” stage, leave room for trial and error and be willing to make choices about what not to

focus on. As some efforts fade, others will emerge, helping fuel the next round of progress.

- Keep looking for opportunities to spread the work to new groups, networks, and areas of concern in the community.

## 2. Develop the existing cadre of leaders

A growing number of Public Innovators and local change-agents have emerged in the past two years. This cadre of leaders is essential to future progress in Reading. To move forward, the community should:

- Convene this emerging cadre of leaders to create and solidify a stronger network of allies. No leader can go it alone, especially in Reading’s current stage of community life where creating change is hard, trying, and tiring. Leaders need personal and emotional support. They need to know others are standing next to them.
- Invest in the continued development of these leaders. The days ahead will bring new challenges, require leaders to navigate uncharted waters, and demand yet more innovative ways of working together. Developing the

capabilities of these leaders to be Turned Outward is essential to keep the work going.

- Grow this cadre of leaders with intentionality. Some turnover is natural. Leaders will burn out, move to other communities, change jobs, and encounter major life changes. Moreover, new opportunities will emerge, requiring new people to step forward. It is critical to strengthen and expand the base of Turned Outward leaders in Reading.

### 3. Invest in key organizations, groups, and partnerships

Multiple organizations and groups are now fueling Reading's progress in various areas. To move forward, the community should:

- Invest in these and other organizations and groups that are poised to continue fueling progress. Remember, the work of many of these organizations and groups is still in the developmental stages. Without proper support, efforts may falter, even fail.
- Some groups will continue to evolve their mission and purpose over time. Examples abound in this report. Recalibrating can be a good thing for organizations and groups; it must be

distinguished from an organization or group simply seeking to stay afloat when its purpose has come to a close.

- Not all organizations, groups, or partnerships are meant to last forever. Some are meant to be temporary catalysts before sunseting. This is critical to keep in mind.

### 4. Nurture informal networks for learning and innovation

An informal network of leaders and organizations is growing in Reading. This is in part evidenced by the numerous examples of individuals who have joined the three teams and now other efforts throughout the community. To move forward, the community should:

- Create spaces for leaders and organizations—including those not already connected to the work—to come together and discuss their efforts and how they can support one another. This is essential to encouraging sustainability.
- Place special emphasis in these spaces on learning and innovation. Focus on what people are learning from their individual efforts, how that relates to what others are learning, and the resulting insights, lessons, and implications for accelerating progress.



- Help people and groups see possibilities for breaking down silos and fragmentation, but do not force collaboration or coordination. This can stymie innovation and learning in the early Catalytic stage. Only when groups are ready and willing should they collaborate.

## 5. Keep building a can-do narrative

As is clear from this report, early stories of change have emerged in Reading. But they are just beginning, and many exist in isolation from one another. Moreover, most people in the community have yet to hear about them or be directly impacted by them. Even some Public Innovators and other change agents may not be aware of the change they are helping create daily. To move forward, the community should:

- Make the invisible visible by helping Public Innovators and other change agents identify, describe, and uplift the change they are creating. This process must become a habit as the change is always unfolding.
- Shine a light on positive stories of change to ensure more of the community sees and hears them. Do not assume people know about the change taking place. Most people will not know about success stories until they are told directly.
- Knit together individual stories of change into a larger narrative that enables people to see that a more promising trajectory of hope is taking shape and with growing momentum. At the same time, avoid over-selling the impact and success of these stories.

The work ahead will be hard. Progress is not a given. There are no guarantees in this work. Yet Reading has what it takes to keep moving forward, to keep building a community where everyone can thrive. In fact, Reading is already demonstrating what is possible when a community starts to take shared action on issues that truly matter to people and works to strengthen its civic culture.

Recall the leader quoted in the introduction. They said, “Reading used to be a place for people to flee. Today,

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“Reading used to be a place for people to flee. Today, it’s a place you want to be.”

it’s a place you want to be.” Ten years ago, who would have thought this kind of transformation—indeed, this kind of hope for the country—would have come from Reading? ■





## Nine Big Missteps for Reading In the Catalytic Stage

In thinking about the next steps Reading can take to grow progress and safeguard sustainability, here are nine missteps The Harwood Institute has identified that communities often make in the “Catalytic” stage. Seek to avoid them.

1. Overpromise and under-deliver. This deepens frustration, even cynicism, and leads to lost hope.
2. Design comprehensive plans that are too big to take on and fail to realistically determine the capacities and needs of the community.
3. Spend time and resources trying to get everyone on board and around the table.
4. Fail to make room for small efforts and miss out on potential allies.
5. Hyper-coordinate activities and participants to get everyone moving in unison. This stifles innovation and creativity.
6. Expend large sums of money before anyone has a clear-eyed view of where investment is most needed and what it will take for those investments to produce real results.
7. Invest only in organizations that produce measurable results when what is most critical is to spark forward movement, build capacities, and create a new sense of possibility.
8. Over-hype success and impact.
9. Move on to the next new thing while leaving behind emerging pockets of change.





