
Literacy Bright Spots: Initial Findings Overview



Engaging the Community,
Aligning Resources
and Empowering Students



Initial Findings Overview

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ImpactTulsa at a glance

Launched: April 2014

Anchor Entity: Tulsa Community Foundation

Leadership: 30 member Leadership Council

Backbone Staff: Five Full-Time Employees

ImpactTulsa Overview

A NEW WAY OF WORKING TOGETHER

Launched in April 2014, ImpactTulsa is an unprecedented regional partnership aimed at improving student outcomes along the education pipeline.

VISION	MISSION	GOAL
All students are guaranteed a high-quality education.	ImpactTulsa aligns the community to provide a pathway for all students to thrive.	Be a model of excellence by dramatically improving student achievement outcomes.

The partnership is a member of the StriveTogether national network that includes 64 community partnerships in 32 states and District of Columbia working to improve education success for every child by bringing together cross-sector partners around a common vision. Together, the network impacts over 8.2 million students nationwide.

GROUP	ROLE
TULSA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION	→ Houses the backbone team; providing administrative and personnel support; acts as a fiscal agent for the partnership
LEADERSHIP COUNCIL	→ Provides strategic decision making; steers and champions the vision and mission of the partnership; removes political barriers
OPERATIONS COUNCIL	→ Provides strategic direction and planning; removes operational barriers; acts as a steering committee for on-the-ground activity
COLLABORATIVE ACTION NETWORK	→ Plan and implement change on-the-ground with teams of practitioners within a well defined area of focus
DATA COUNCIL	→ Provides access to key student data; analyzes data and supports the entire partnership
BACKBONE STAFF	→ Partnership support in all areas; provides leadership works through political and operations barriers; charged with moving the partnership forward;
COMMUNICATIONS COUNCIL	→ Provides strategic direction and planning for communication strategies to share best practices across partnership and broader community

KEY PEOPLE

ImpactTulsa is led by CEO and former Tulsa Mayor Kathy Taylor and is advised by former Union Public Schools Superintendent Cathy Burden along with a core backbone staff. Our Leadership Council is chaired by Stacy Schusterman, Chair of Samson Energy.

ImpactTulsa Outcomes

Soon after the launch of ImpactTulsa in the spring of 2014, our partners articulated six outcomes along the education pipeline that our community would remain committed to jointly impacting.



OUR PARTNERS

Our partners include 15 school districts across the Tulsa region, six postsecondary institutions, the Tulsa Area United Way, Tulsa Regional Chamber, Oklahoma Innovation Institute, Tulsa Health Department and both the Charles and Lynn Schusterman and George Kaiser Family Foundations along with many other nonprofits and faith-based organizations. These partnerships have helped propel ImpactTulsa to the Sustaining Gateway in the Strive Theory of Action in less than one year.

OUR PRIORITIES

The data across all six of our outcomes demonstrate the need for community collective action. In an effort to prioritize the work of the collective partnership, three areas of focus for initial action were discussed, selected and eventually approved by the Leadership Council.

- [KINDERGARTEN READINESS](#)
- [THIRD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY](#)
- [HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION - POSTSECONDARY AND CAREER READY](#)

Given these outcomes, our partnership is working to execute a “Start Early, End Well” strategy for change in our community.



Goal 2019

Our partnership's goal is to become a Proof Point within the StriveTogether national network by 2019. Becoming a Proof Point community means 60% of our outcomes are moving in the right direction. As a first step to getting there and in line with our initial priorities, we have set the following goals for our partnership:

- 10% INCREASE IN THIRD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY
- 10% INCREASE IN THE ON-TIME COUNTY GRADUATION RATE
- 12% INCREASE IN THE POSTSECONDARY ENTRY

These goals were adopted by the Ready to Read and Graduate918 Operations Councils.

Reading Proficiency



Nationally, students who are not reading on grade level by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

ImpactTulsa¹ has identified third-grade reading as one of six key outcomes to measure the status and progress of education in the region. This brief summarizes interviews with teachers and administrators in schools whose students - across family income levels - exhibit exceptional reading scores. Respondents credited building leadership, high expectations, staff collaboration, personalized learning, and data-informed instruction as keys to success.

WHY EARLY LITERACY?

Two-thirds of all students and about 80% of those from low income families are not proficient readers by the end of third grade. Seventy-four percent of students who fail to read proficiently by third grade falter in later grades and often drop out of school before earning a diploma².

Proficiency by the end of third grade is critical as students transition to a more complex and varied curriculum in fourth grade and beyond. It signals that young learners are building highly sought after skills of communication and interpretation.

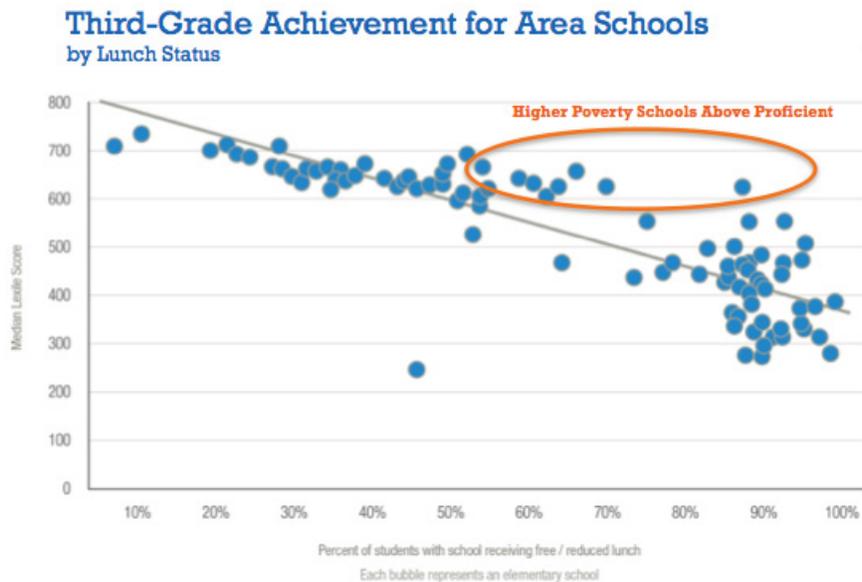
The third-grade reading benchmark is a common focus across education departments and business/philanthropic initiatives. The knowledge base around what works, and in which contexts, is growing rapidly. Evidence-based curricula, extended learning time, new approaches to parental engagement, and an attention to consistent student attendance are being evaluated broadly. Successful efforts are expanding.

The 2014 ImpactTulsa community baseline report findings for the Tulsa-area revealed that 47% of third-grade students are reading at a proficient Lexile³ level of 600 or above. When comparing free and reduced lunch students' median Lexile score of 471 with their paid lunch peers' median Lexile score of 651, there is a 180 point difference in scores. The difference is more than one full grade level.

Initial Lessons from ImpactTulsa’s Bright Spot Schools

ImpactTulsa is committed to using data as a flashlight, not a hammer. An analysis of reading proficiency scores across our partner districts identified schools that are showing strong outcomes with low-income students. During Spring 2015, in an effort to learn about the instructional and data-driven approaches of school leaders, teachers, instructional coaches, and reading specialists - ImpactTulsa identified and visited six Bright Spot Schools. Low-income students in these schools scored a median Lexile score of 656.

To glean insights from these schools’ success, ImpactTulsa interviewed over 25 teachers and administrators. Teachers were asked about collaboration, professional development including coaching and mentoring, academic goal setting for individual students, and specific interventions (e.g., curricula and grouping strategies). Administrators were asked about academic expectations, alignment with district reading initiatives, curriculum choice, professional development including coaching and mentoring, teacher evaluations and allocation of learning time.



To accurately display the reading proficiency among third-graders in our region, ImpactTulsa, with the guidance of area superintendents used the Lexile scoring system.

Third-Grade Reading Level	
Lexile Score	Proficiency Level
Below Grade Level	
< 250L	At Risk
250L - 400L	Basic 1
400 - 500L	Basic 2
On Grade Level	
500 - 600L	Low Proficient
600 - 700L	Proficient
700 - 800L	High Proficient
Above Grade Level	
Above 800L	Advanced

LESSON #1: ORGANIZE THE SCHOOL AROUND A COMMON VISION OF READING SUCCESS

Respondents pointed to building leadership - administrators working closely with teachers - as the key driver of success. It originates with committed principals who are champions of their schools. They communicate a vision, build allies among teachers and parents, set school-level goals, minimize distractions, and protect instructional time.

The required changes - in process and curricula - often meet resistance in the early stages of implementation, so identifying a core group of teachers who share the vision is critical. Gradually, these "early adopters" become leaders themselves and build momentum for change. The authority to investigate and try new techniques is established.

"Culture, culture, culture. Creating a culture around the importance of reading fosters a 'whatever it takes' mentality."

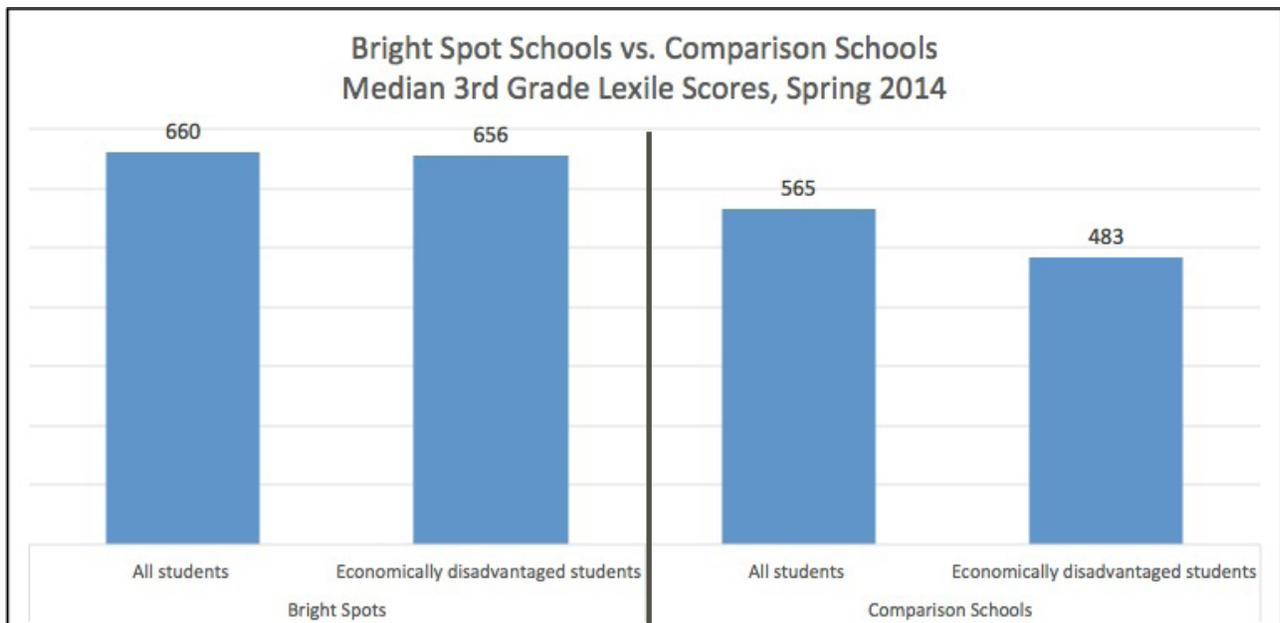
Parental involvement is critical. Staff has ongoing communication with parents about individualized learning goals and student progress. Principals and teachers adapted to engage hard-to-reach parents by making home visits or meeting them in the school parking lot during drop-off and pick-up.

LESSON #2: ESTABLISH HIGH EXPECTATIONS

High expectations are at the foundation of all the strategies and tactics deployed by Bright Spot Schools. Staff shares a fundamental belief that all students - regardless of income or family circumstances - are capable of becoming exceptional readers. Staff set high but attainable goals for every student to monitor progress. Poverty may influence approaches to learning, but it is not an excuse.

Expectations are similarly high for the overall school environment. Students are expected to give their best effort every day and show respect for their classmates and adults. If they fall short, parents become involved. Both strong classroom management and engaging academic decorum set the tone. They find time to praise individual and collective success.

"If the teacher doesn't believe the students can learn, they won't."



LESSON #3: COLLABORATE, COLLABORATE, COLLABORATE

Respondents universally pointed to the importance of staff collaboration - between teachers and administrators, between teachers across grades, and for all staff within schools. The old model - individual teachers isolated in their classrooms - is out.

A key to collaboration is creating the time and space for teachers to observe teachers. Best practice guides are useful and proliferating. But in addition to reviewing a list of instructional strategies, respondents said it's critical to watch skilled teacher peers put reading strategies into practice. This is especially important for novice teachers where research shows skills can build rapidly during the initial years. Bright Spot Schools create both informal and formal mentoring relationships such as using paid-substitute days to accelerate the onboarding of new teachers.

"Everyone visits everyone. There is no shame in it. Go ask for help, from anyone, and you will get it."

LESSON #4: DELIVER PERSONALIZED, STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Respondents emphasized the importance of evolving away from outdated practices of the past - one approach for an entire class of students. These successful schools establish personalized student reading goals, deliver differentiated instruction that is tailored to individual needs, and organize around small reading groups, with time allotted for each student to read aloud.

The Bright Spot Schools use a variety of means to deliver student-centered learning. Small reading groups - with no more than five to seven students - are a common approach. Teachers establish "literacy stations" with book collections that span across reading proficiency levels. In some schools, the stations are open across grade levels. Keeping the groups flexible is important. Students can move up and down without stigma.

While students at similar proficiency levels are generally grouped together, teachers will sometimes mix proficiency levels and ask advanced students to lead a group. Special attention is paid to reinforcing advanced students and the opportunity to teach peers is viewed both as a challenge and recognition for strong progress.

Hearing every student read aloud throughout the school year is a key. And, for struggling students, schools have used Title I resources to create intensive, one-on-one assistance with dedicated Reading Specialists using focused support materials.

Dedicated reading time is critical. Some schools set explicit goals for the amount of time dedicated to reading each day and have even created a whole school reading block.

LESSON #5: INSTILL A DATA-DRIVEN CULTURE

Bright Spot Schools embraced data universally to support instruction and reinforce the culture at the school, administrator, teacher, classroom, and individual student levels.

Administrators routinely meet with teachers by grade level and individually to rigorously review formative and summative assessment data and inquire about instructional strategies for struggling students. In addition, a few schools implemented central data walls in the principal's office and also in classrooms for students to monitor their own progress.

Students are empowered by having personal data binders/folders to fully track their reading progress and set their own goals during periodic teacher check-ins. The awareness of data among students fosters a supportive environment rather than

"Rigor is the best word. Data and intervention...Data everywhere but anonymous."

Bright Spot Lessons Align with Research on Effective Schools

The ImpactTulsa interviews uncovered lessons that are similar to those identified by a seminal economic study of highly effective schools.

A pair of Harvard researchers took an unprecedented dive into the inner workings of 39 schools in New York City to see why some flourish and others don't⁴. They surveyed principals, teachers, students, and parents; videotaped class activities; scoured accounting records; and checked curricula for rigor.

When they matched their school conditions against outcomes, they concluded traditional school inputs (class sizes, teachers' degrees, and per-student spending) did not totally predict a school's effectiveness. Rather, they found the overachieving schools had redesigned their operations to deliver high-dosage tutoring, extended instructional time, and frequent teacher coaching.

And the overachieving schools used student data extensively to guide instructional practice. In the effective schools, teachers monitored student proficiency with well-designed assessments; discussed results with principals and other teachers; and used the data to adjust tutoring groups, assign remediation, modify instruction, and develop individualized student goals. In other words, teachers opened their classrooms and employed data to pinpoint and address the specific needs of each learner.

Curricula and Programs: What Works?

Bright Spot interviewees primarily pointed to leadership, culture, expectations, and well-designed processes as the keys to success. They also mentioned a range of interventions - specific curricula and assessment tools - as important complements to staff-driven change.

The U.S. Department of Education, through the What Works Clearinghouse⁵, has invested heavily in building the evidence-base on specific interventions that impact early literacy. Researchers have culled through hundreds of studies and classified 79 literacy interventions as having strong, weak, or no evidence of effectiveness. These meta-analyses go as far as estimating the expected improvement across a range of outcome domains: alphabets, reading comprehension, fluency, print knowledge, and general achievement. The clearinghouse is a great resource to learn more about what's known and what isn't known and about interventions in the field.

Next Steps

ImpactTulsa will continue to identify best practices proven to impact the lives of students and share them regionally. By focusing on an important part of the educational pipeline, we can make strides to help all students become stronger readers. There is still much more to learn about how to raise reading proficiency and how educators are already making a difference each school day. The next steps include:

- Identify new or continuing Bright Spot Schools and conduct interviews based on literacy proficiency data for the 2014-2015 school year.
- Visiting a comparison group of high need schools matched by free-and-reduced lunch status, with lower reading proficiency rates for a comparative analysis.
- Propose the creation of Principal Professional Learning Communities across schools with varying reading proficiency rates to review data while sharing challenges and opportunities.

Citations

¹ ImpactTulsa is an unprecedented partnership connecting over 200 organizations impacting 170,000+ students.

² See Grade Level Reading. Retrieved from <http://gradelevelreading.net/our-work>.

³ See Scholastic Reading Counts. 2009. *Student Placement Guide: Determining placement with Grade Level Proficiencies*. Lexile scores measure student reading proficiency. A score of at least 600 is considered proficient for third-grade readers as designated in the Scholastic Reading Counts! program. Retrieved from http://edproductsupport.scholastic.com/content/techsupport/src/documentation/SRC_Proficiency_Placement_Guide.pdf

⁴ Dobbie, Will and Roland G. Fryer Jr. December 2012. *Getting Beneath the Veil of Effective Schools: Evidence from New York City*. Harvard University and EdLabs

⁵ Institute of Education Sciences. *WhatWorks Clearinghouse*. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/default.aspx>