



Literacy-Related Services in Partnership with Schools

Community-Based Organizations' Perceptions of Facilitators and Barriers

Kristen D. Beach, Kristin D. Sinclair, Jennifer L. Merry, Chris O'Brien, Shannon Pardue, Adriana L. Medina, & Lan Kolano

Literacy has been the focus of education reform for decades, with federal and state-level legislation aimed at enhancing teaching, learning, and accountability in K-12 public schools.

The most recent wave of literacy reform has focused on the adoption and implementation of evidence- or scientifically based reading instruction, or what has become known as the “Science of Reading” (Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). The body of research that composes the Science of Reading recommends the use of systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension for developing foundational literacy skills in elementary school (Petscher et al., 2020). Evidence-based practices and programs related to reading and literacy development are well established; as of 2025, a total of 40 U.S. states and the District of Columbia have

passed laws or enacted policies mandating evidence-based literacy instruction in schools. Mandates have resulted in changes in teacher preparation and licensure; teacher professional development and coaching; and assessment, materials, and instruction (Schwartz, 2022). In North Carolina, the state in which the present study was conducted, the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021 (S.L. 2021-8) mandated that literacy instruction be grounded in the Science

KRISTEN D. BEACH is a professor; **KRISTIN D. SINCLAIR, JENNIFER L. MERRY,** and **SHANNON PARDUE** are doctoral students; and **CHRIS O'BRIEN** is an associate professor in the Department of Special Education and Child Development, UNC Charlotte. **ADRIANA L. MEDINA** is a professor and department chair, Department of Reading and Elementary Education, UNC Charlotte. **LAN KOLANO** is a professor and department chair, Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education, UNC Charlotte.

of Reading statewide; all elementary grade teachers were required to participate in intensive training to incorporate evidence-based literacy instruction in their classrooms.

The increased focus on evidence-based literacy instruction extends beyond the school day. Researchers have underscored the positive impact of tutoring in the out-of-school time (OST) space to improve academic outcomes (Nickow et al., 2024). Curriculum-aligned, high-impact high-dosage tutoring is most effective (Nickow et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2021). Such tutoring emphasizes, in part, high-quality curricula and materials, including research- and evidence-based practices and programs, as well as highly trained and supported tutors (Robinson et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a resurgence of OST tutoring efforts provided by for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike, in light of COVID-related learning loss (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2021) and the availability of federal emergency relief funds via the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act; P.L. 116-136) dedicated for academic skill recovery efforts in districts across the nation. In Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, the setting for the present study, the largest local school district used relief dollars to launch a sizable OST tutoring initiative in 2022, inviting tutoring providers from across the nation, including community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide OST tutoring services, to propose high-impact, high-dosage tutoring.

Traditional OST Programming and Its Connection to CBOs

Many CBOs provide some form of tutoring in OST (e.g., afterschool) settings as part of their services to schools. However, CBOs' missions and goals at the organization level, as well as goals related to their OST services, are typically broader than skill-specific tutoring. OST programming is designed to reinforce, extend, and enhance school-based learning through complementary practices that reflect providers' distinct missions, settings, and relationships with youth, and aims to support academic learning, experiment with other forms of learning, encourage connections with communities and families, and encourage children to

set and pursue goals for their own learning. Targeted outcomes are broad and include academic, social, emotional, and other developmental domains (Noam et al., 2003).

To achieve these goals, the OST hours must be structured differently from the school day, incorporating extended, enriched, and intentional learning (Noam et al., 2003). Extended learning provides reinforcement of school-day academic instruction,

often emphasizing homework help or skill-specific tutoring. High-impact high-dosage tutoring could be considered an intensive form of extended learning, requiring specialized materials and skilled human

resources for successful implementation. Enriched learning activities incorporate self-directed, explorative, and hands-on learning experiences that are different from, but complementary to, classroom instruction. Intentional learning fosters nonacademic skills and social behaviors.

Moreover, afterschool programs are intermediary environments (Noam et al., 2003), providing important connections between the school, community, and home (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Epstein, 2011; Yamauchi et al., 2017). CBOs that provide OST programming engage students in extended and enriched learning that forms a curricular bridge (Noam et al., 2003) between the school and afterschool spaces; their broader missions and programs reflect their engagement across spheres by including child-, family- and community-centered supports.

Conflicts in School and OST Priorities

Strong partnerships, shared resources, and communication between provider and school partners are important for improving student outcomes in OST programming (Anthony & Morra, 2016; Wimer et al., 2003). Partnerships can be fostered by collaboration and communication, alignment of content, intentional design, and instructional quality of OST activities with in-school experiences (Noam et al., 2004). There are varying degrees of curricular alignment, however, and perceptions of instructional quality are somewhat dependent on beliefs about instructional goals. Despite recommendations for OST programming to supplement, rather than duplicate, the school day (Noam et al., 2003), researchers have found that

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educators prioritize and value OST programming that features extended learning opportunities, highly aligned with the school curriculum

As examples, Anthony and Morra (2016) noted conflicts in priorities of schools and afterschool providers, with schools focusing on academic extension and afterschool providers supporting both academic learning and whole-child development. Similarly, Ruhr and Danforth (2024) reported that educators placed emphasis on the need for afterschool programs to address academic and social needs of enrolled children.

An educational context focused on COVID recovery, the Science of Reading, and high-impact high-dosage tutoring, as was the case in the present study, could place additional pressure on afterschool programs to emphasize curricular-aligned intensive extended learning programs that resemble high-impact high-dosage tutoring over multifaceted programming. Although extended learning programs, and specifically high-impact high-dosage tutoring, demonstrate promise for improving academic outcomes, an overemphasis on high-impact high-dosage tutoring could promote tension in school-CBO partnerships, especially when adoption of such programming is misaligned with broader CBO missions, or when CBOs lack materials, staffing, training, or other capacity to provide such intensive programming.

The main purpose of the current study was to explore the perspectives of nonprofit CBO leaders regarding what they perceive to be the literacy-related needs in the region, as well as their perceptions of facilitators and barriers to providing literacy services in partnership with schools. *Facilitators* are defined here as factors that promote or enhance the implementation and success of programming. *Barriers* are factors that impede or limit the effectiveness or execution of programming. By focusing on the CBO perspective within the present educational context, this study can provide critical insights that may serve to strengthen

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contemporary partnerships and promote student success.

Methods

The present study took place in the large, urban county of Mecklenburg, NC. In July 2025, the population exceeded 1.2 million; the median household income was \$87,005 and the poverty rate was 10.6%. Just over 22% of people aged 5 or above spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). According to *U.S. News and World Report* (n.d.), Mecklenburg County houses the second largest school district in the state (18th in the nation), serving more than 144,000 students across 184 schools (121 elementary schools). Minority enrollment is approximately 80% and 49.2% of students are economically disadvantaged. According to recent state testing, 42% percent of elementary grade students scored proficient in reading, and 51% scored proficient in math. The region has been compared to other large urban centers in terms of regional strengths and needs across a variety of sectors, including education.

Mecklenburg County houses more than 2,500 nonprofit organizations (North Carolina Center for Nonprofits, 2022), many of which are education focused and have multistate or national presence. The Charlotte–Mecklenburg community is particularly literacy focused. Many nonprofits have literacy-focused missions, there is a large library system, professional sports teams promote literacy initiatives, and funding opportunities exist for literacy-related programming. A significant asset is a community initiative called Read Charlotte, which was initiated in 2016 with the primary goal of promoting literacy achievement in the region. Moreover, the largest local school district in the region includes an entire department dedicated to supporting the more than 400 school–community partnerships, with the goal of promoting positive academic, social, and engagement outcomes of students. This department holds quarterly partnership meetings to promote communication, partnership expansion, and goal alignment. The rich

literacy focus of the region presented a unique opportunity to examine CBO perspectives regarding regional needs and school partnerships.

The research team was composed of five education faculty and five doctoral students from a local public university who brought prior experience in education and CBO engagement. All have a shared commitment to advancing literacy.

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Mills & Jordan, 2023). Phase 1 of data collection included interviews and paired interviews. Data and preliminary findings from Phase 1 informed development of a survey, administered during Phase 2. This study was approved by the university's institutional review board. All participating organizations gave permission for their organization names to be used in reporting.

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Recruitment, Data Collection, and Analysis

The selection of CBOs for both phases was informed by a purposeful list of 32 nonprofit organizations focused on literacy services in Mecklenburg County, identified through systematic web searches and expert recommendations. Data were collected in the summer of 2024.

Qualitative Data: Interviews

Phase 1 participants were nine of the 32 eligible CBOs, selected using purposive and random sampling to ensure proportional representation in terms of the specific type of literacy services they provided (e.g., tutoring, books and other literacy resources, educator professional development), and whether they were regionally or nationally organized. See Table 1 for a description of Phase 1 participants and the literacy-focused services they provided.

Together, one faculty member and one doctoral student conducted each interview virtually via Zoom with recording enabled. Interviews ranged from 29 to 80 minutes ($M = 56$ minutes) and followed a semi-structured protocol with 11 questions exploring each organization's vision, mission, focal population,

program goals, and perceptions of facilitators and barriers encountered in their work. Data analysis for this study focused on responses regarding facilitators and barriers related to their work with schools.

Within a month of the preliminary interviews, one faculty member and one doctoral student led in-person paired interviews with eight of the same nine CBOs. Paired interviews ranged from 88 minutes to 102 minutes ($M = 97$ minutes) and allowed CBOs to expand interview responses. Paired interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that included 16 researcher-developed questions exploring local literacy-related needs and CBO perspectives on how those needs were met, CBO self-perceptions on facilitators and barriers to meeting literacy needs, and what support and partnerships were needed for successfully implementing their programs.

Qualitative data collection resulted in 13 data sources (i.e., transcripts; one for each of nine interviews plus four paired-interview transcripts) that were created from audio using Rev.com, and verified by two doctoral student researchers. The research team sent verified transcripts to CBO respondents for member checking; one CBO returned its transcript with edits for clarity. Coding was completed in teams initially using a codebook of deductive codes, which were descriptive and focused on identifying narrative references to facilitators and barriers to service provision. Inductive codes were applied during a second round of coding and identified specific types of facilitators and barriers. Researchers reconciled disagreements at team coding meetings. Thematic analysis was used to identify key facilitators and barriers.

Quantitative Data: Inquiry Survey

Phase 2 data collection involved a survey sent electronically to directors of all 32 nonprofit CBOs. Survey respondents returned complete surveys within a one-month return deadline.

The research team developed and revised survey items to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. Phase 1 participants provided feedback on survey question wording, structure,

Table 1. Overview of community organizations from Phase 1 data collection

Organization	Overview	Literacy-Focused Programming
Avery and Masa	A 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in the Southern region, supporting families with reading, financial literacy, GED services, and afterschool programs. It emerged from community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and aims for holistic impact across neighborhoods, enhancing engagement and program effectiveness.	Book clubs focused on a set of narrative texts with themes related to environmental responsibility and conservation. Book club activities are aligned with third-grade literacy standards in North Carolina and designed to promote interest in reading, social-emotional learning, and literacy.
Caterpillar Ministries	A 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in 2007. Serves a largely Hispanic population in a mobile home park neighborhood. Provides holistic community support, including job skills training, conflict resolution, parent workshops, high school mentorship, counseling, and preschool partnerships.	Academic enrichment in the form of tutoring through partnerships with other organizations, and homework help.
Charlotte Speech and Hearing (CSH)	Operating for 56 years, CSH focuses on audiology, speech, and critical community needs. Partnering with United Way, it supports teachers of children from birth to three years old and targets areas identified as corridors of opportunity.	Direct service instruction in language development through evidence-based programs that build language skills related to auditory comprehension, phonemic awareness, print knowledge, and language expansion.
Helping Education	Founded in 2011 and based in Raleigh, it expanded to Charlotte in 2018–2019 and formerly operated in 11 North Carolina counties. Its interventions were implemented in all U.S. states and more than 60 countries. The organization emphasized educational equity through evidence-based literacy programs, aiming to serve 50,000 students in five years. All operations ceased in October 2024.	Afterschool tutoring using a research-based program designed by literacy experts and aligned with scientific evidence for supporting reading fluency.
International House	A 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to immigrant support and community integration focused on youth literacy programs for K-5 students who do not speak English at home, running summer school programs and exploring year-round support strategies to ensure educational continuity for immigrant children.	Afterschool and summer tutoring focused on K-5 foundational reading skills for emergent bilingual students.
Meck Pre-K	Serving Mecklenburg County, focuses on early childhood education from prenatal through a child's fifth birthday. Key programs include the Dolly Parton Imagination Library and a pre-K curriculum across 106 classrooms. It is governed by a community and executive board and benefits from county funding.	Employs Creative Curriculum, which includes oral language activities and early literacy skill development.
Promising Pages	A 501(c)(3) nonprofit managing a book bank that redistributes donated children's books to community partners. It operates locally and extends to surrounding counties, supporting other nonprofits, schools, universities, and libraries to address inequities through book distribution.	In addition to book distribution, Promising Pages connects families and communities to local literacy-related resources, programming, and learning opportunities to support reading engagement at home.
Read Charlotte	A 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on improving early literacy development for children in Mecklenburg County from birth to third grade, affecting elementary and middle school. Realigns community resources to address early literacy challenges and is set to sunset by 2030 after achieving its educational goals.	Not direct service providers, but support other community organizations to provide instruction and high-impact high-dosage tutoring using research- and evidence-based programs.
Strive CLT	A small-scale 501(c)(3) nonprofit that conducts year-long book clubs and summer programs, primarily operating locally with some national expansion. Distributes books through giveaways and school partnerships, focusing on enhancing literacy in schools throughout the academic year and expanding outreach in the summer.	Provides afterschool literacy enrichment in the form of homework help, Active Reading, and vocabulary support.

and content, and the research team made revisions. Surveys contained a series of demographic questions. Respondents were also asked to rank-order a list of literacy-related needs in the county and to select responses from a provided list of potential facilitators and barriers in the county that helped or hindered the CBO's ability to address the area's needs. For rank-order and selection questions, answer choices were derived from Phase 1 data analysis, allowed for multiple selection, and included an "other" option.

Survey data were analyzed using frequency counts and proportions for items related to county needs, and school-related facilitators and barriers. The research team also summarized narrative data related to work with schools included in the "comments" section of the survey.

Methodological Integrity

Throughout the research process, the research team remained conscious of how our backgrounds and experiences might influence interactions and interpretations. To address potential bias, the team engaged in weekly reflections, discussed emerging findings, monitored assumptions, and created a comfortable environment for Phase 1 participants. Recognizing the roles researchers can play in power dynamics, the team approached data collection in Phase 1 with intentional neutrality, using consistently framed questions to minimize bias.

The team maintained systematic records of methodological decisions. Peer reviews and debriefings assisted with reducing bias and enhanced the integrity of findings. The researchers provided a detailed description of the focus county and participant characteristics to enhance the transferability of the study's findings.

Findings

The nine interview respondents (Table 1) were nonprofit organizations with literacy-focused missions. Read Charlotte does not provide direct services to children; rather, it serves as a broker between literacy research and practice, with a focus on supporting CBOs to understand and implement evidence-based practices

in literacy and assessment, as well as connecting CBOs to schools. Meck Pre-K represents a system of high-quality pre-K programs in North Carolina. The remaining organizations directly or indirectly serve children in the area of literacy, by providing enrichment and general tutoring (Avery and Masa, Caterpillar Ministries, International House, Strive CLT), research- or evidence based instruction or tutoring (Charlotte Speech and Hearing, Helping Education) or access to books and resources (Promising Pages).

Of the 32 distributed surveys, 27 CBOs submitted complete responses (84.38% response rate). Organizations provided services to children in preschool ($N = 1$, 3.7%), in kindergarten to second grade ($N = 17$, 62.96%), and/or in grade 3 to 5 ($N = 18$, 66.67%). Most organizations ($N = 21$, 77.77%) provided their services at a school, with others pro-

viding services at their brick-and-mortar buildings, online, in another community location, or at students' homes. Twenty-five organizations responded to questions about timing and type of services. All 25 provided literacy services during the academic year and/or summer; focus areas included academic tutoring ($N = 16$, 64.0%), engaging

with families ($N = 22$, 88.0%), providing books or other reading materials ($N = 22$, 88.0%), or providing professional development to educators ($N = 19$, 76.0%). Regarding literacy programming, more than half of CBOs indicated that vocabulary (52%), listening comprehension (59%), and/or reading comprehension (56%) were of primary focus. Conversely, fewer CBOs identified phonemic awareness (44%), phonics (48%), or fluency (37%) as the primary focus. In addition, 78% of organizations identified motivation and engagement to be a primary focus in addition to literacy-specific skills.

Perceptions of Regional Needs: Students Lack Foundational Skills; Schools Have Primary Responsibility

When asked about regional needs, CBO leaders emphasized that many students, including third and fourth graders, lacked proficiency in foundational literacy skills, and that the COVID-19 pandemic was in part to blame. About half (45%) of survey respondents

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ranked children’s low levels of literacy as a top-three regional problem (of 12 options). Interview respondents expressed concern over the ability of schools to address COVID-related learning loss on their own, referencing high teacher turnover and a history of poor-quality instruction. CBO leaders said schools turned to CBOs for supplemental support, but expected too much:

I feel like we do all the heavy lifting ... how much more is it that y’all want us to do? What is happening at school? The ask of the nonprofit community is huge.

Although CBO leaders felt compelled to respond to COVID-related learning loss, they continued to see educational entities as the ones fundamentally responsible for addressing literacy deficits. Specifically, survey results showed that they viewed educators (63%), schools (56%), and districts (56%) as the top three parties responsible for foundational reading—far outpacing nonprofits (15%).

Perceptions of Partnerships: Schools and Funders Are Important, but They Can Create Barriers

Another major theme centered on the tension inherent in partnerships between CBOs, educational entities, and corporate or foundation-based funders. CBO leaders viewed educational entities and funders as

both critically important partners and as barriers to enacting CBO programs and missions. This theme was reflected across data sources. In the survey, 24 respondents (88.9%) identified educational entities as key assets or facilitators in the region, yet 17 (63%) also identified them as barriers. Similarly, whereas 22 survey respondents (81.5%) identified funding as an asset, 23 (85.2%) identified it as a barrier. Narrative comments pointed to positive relationships, strong communication, and shared goal-setting as facilitators. Communication challenges, a lack of alignment in curricular and programming priorities, overwhelmed staff, and limited physical space were specified barriers (Table 2).

Interview data revealed that a mismatch between the core missions of CBOs and the curricular priorities of schools and funders contributed to tensions in partnerships. Whereas the district’s strategic plan focused on foundational literacy skills for elementary students, many CBOs provided more holistic services rather than focusing exclusively on evidence-based foundational skills tutoring. CBO leaders felt that school buy-in was often contingent on how closely their curriculum aligned with the instructional priorities of educational entities—and, sometimes, funders. The following sections integrate qualitative and quantitative findings to further explore how partnerships supported CBO programming,

Table 2. Facilitators and barriers to partnerships

Data Phase	Assets and Facilitators	Barriers
Phase 1: Qualitative	• Goal alignment • Curriculum alignment • Resource access • Partnerships with school personnel • Partnerships with other CBOs and library	• Low reading proficiency levels • Lingering pandemic impacts • Emphasis on foundational skills limits recognition of other supports • Small staff capacity • Principal and teacher turnover • Challenges establishing trust and relationships with schools
Phase 2: Quantitative	• Positive relationships • Supportive school administration • Strong partnerships • Shared goal setting • Good communication	• Communication challenges • Schools and school systems overwhelmed or too busy to engage • “Bureaucratic” rules and regulations limit program scope • Lack of alignment between CBO programming and school priorities • Limited physical space in schools

Note: This table summarizes school-related factors reported as affecting collaboration with CBOs.

with particular attention to how educational entities functioned simultaneously as critical partners and significant barriers to CBO programming.

Other CBOs and Educational Entities as Critical Partners in Programming

CBOs viewed other nonprofit organizations and educational entities as critical partners for enacting their programming. Although CBO partnerships centered broadly around connecting families and students to services, resource sharing, and mutual program promotion, many CBOs intentionally partnered with others to increase alignment between their programming and literacy-related priorities held by the school district and funders. Read Charlotte's endorsement of evidence-based literacy practices and focus on aligning CBO programming with district priorities may have been a driving force behind CBOs' attention to highly aligned extended programming. Read Charlotte said:

I think any literacy conversation in Charlotte Mecklenburg today that is not grounded in the district's five-year plan is missing the mark. I mean, they've clearly laid out, here's what we're after. ... The number-one priority for elementary and middle school was literacy.

That's why we have goals that extend to grade eight on literacy. ... The moment those goals got passed in October of last year, we knew where the puck was going and we started skating in that direction. So to me, it would feel like a missed opportunity to really not ground all of that because [the superintendent] and her leadership team have given us the clearest direction.

CBOs that did not specialize in providing extended programming that was highly aligned with school curricula and evidence-based literacy practices (such as high-impact high-dosage tutoring) described partnering with other CBOs or educators so that they could provide such programming, which they viewed as valuable. One organization, for example, described working closely with a local district teacher as well as university faculty to ensure that the curriculum in one of their programs was directly aligned with

the district's curriculum. Another also described partnerships to expand program offerings:

[W]e are working on partnering with [another project] in order to [provide tutoring in decoding] for some students and also with the library to [incorporate] Active Reading [a regional program developed by Read Charlotte, based on dialogic reading (Pillinger & Vardy, 2022) with training provided by the public library system], which we know is already research based, but we would like to make it robust and usable in this way so that kids are getting it in high dosage. ... Even though Active Reading is available for just about anybody, I wanted to still partner with [the library] on that and make sure I was doing all the things right.

Another organization that described itself as a "holistic" service provider whose members were "not experts in literacy" emphasized the value of other organizations doing the "heavy lifting" for it when it came to academic tutoring. They said: "What we do is we have the volunteers, the space, the kids, and we will do the program, but [the literacy experts] are doing all of the data collection, the assessments, the training, [and] the content."

Partnerships with educational entities were also viewed as paramount for program success. To illustrate, one organization noted that its partnership with the district and school allowed it to provide literacy skills instruction in the afterschool space; previously, it was restricted to community residences. Another, which focused its services within the community, stressed the role schools played in helping to identify children within its community who would benefit from CBO literacy programming:

When [these opportunities] opened up for the summer, we reached out to the school and said, "Who are the kids that we should target for these programs?" ... We're really relying on the expertise of the schools.

CBOs described partnerships with school personnel, specifically principals and teachers, that facilitated programming. Specifically, one leveraged

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partnerships with school principals to identify a site coordinator and teachers who would promote and teach in its afterschool program:

Principals value [our program]. And so they work with us to come into the school, they help us identify that site coordinator. They encourage their teachers to work with us and explain the program. And we have seen that that makes a huge difference. ... We provide the tutors who are [district] teachers, who we're paying to stay after school with a supplemental curriculum. We feel really strongly about having the credentialed teachers as tutors.

Other organizations also noted the value of partnerships with schools and principals in relation to scaling up. One explained that scaling up is sometimes facilitated when the principal of a school partner moves to a new school and duplicates the CBO-school partnership in the new building: "The way this works is you have to build relationships with the people at the school because if you don't have the relationships, it's not going to work." Another mentioned leveraging existing relationships with word-of-mouth recommendations from principals to scale up its programming across schools. Yet another described the value of teacher partnerships for promoting its program, which distributes books to children during the summer months.

Educational Entities and Funders as Barriers to Programming: Trust, Gatekeeping, Focus on Evidence-Based Practices, Friction Between Priorities

Despite partnerships and collaboration with educational entities being paramount for CBO success, educational entities—and, sometimes, funders—were also seen as one of the most significant barriers to providing the kinds of services CBOs felt would "move the needle" in literacy. First, several CBOs voiced concerns with getting school leadership to "trust" CBO staff expertise and program quality. They shared a sentiment that the school system was being overly restrictive with which programs were allowed in buildings, from "bureaucratic" rules that limit program scope to school office personnel who prevented CBO access to schools for "silly reasons." This was especially true for programs that adopted a more holistic approach to student and family support, as opposed to focusing only on curriculum-aligned, intensive

extensions. This general feeling was captured in the following quote:

We're here to support the work that you do, so if you let us do our job or if you support us in the work that we're doing, it's going to make your job easier. And at the end of the day, if we're all student-centered, it's going to have the greatest impact on the student. And so if that's the bottom line, I can't figure out for the life of me where all the challenge comes from trying to implement or bring or open access for students who would not get [access otherwise].

Principals were sometimes seen as gatekeepers preventing partnership. One CBO perceived that principals did not see the CBO's homework help and social-emotional skill-focused programming as "just as meaningful" as tutoring focused on foundational skills. The organization emphasized its perception of the limited impact that tutoring has on a child, and its desire for the district to coordinate and leverage a larger range of services across providers:

Tutoring is important, but if that is the start and the finish of what you do, you're going in, you're touching the child and you're leaving, then that impact is likely going to be for the moment. But what happens next year when they've advanced out of your program, but they still need something else? We don't have any continuums. ... We've got all these organizations, but we haven't set it up in a way that [supports a continuum], and I feel like the district could help us a little bit with that.

Some respondents reported that many funders also restricted awards to evidence-based or evidence-informed tutoring approaches (i.e., those aligned with high-impact high-dosage tutoring), neglecting indirect, innovative or family-centered approaches to holistic child and family development:

In the meantime, mom is struggling to even keep the house or the roof over their heads. So I realize we're supposed to be talking about literacy, but it's all connected ... and if the corporate philanthropy world here in Charlotte honestly would say "enough is enough," and ask us all to come around the table and say, "How can we really fund work that will move the needle for literacy and the household together?" this community would be so different. It would look so different.

CBOs that provided academic support, but through enrichment programming rather than foundational skills tutoring, also experienced friction between their programming and perceived school priorities. One designed its book club program to align with third-grade literacy standards, and its program is championed by a former teacher. However, given difficulty with school buy-in, it wondered: “Do we need to be offering a foundational-type program for those younger grades? How do we stick to [what we know is] important, without undermining the importance of other [literacy] skills? Having principals see that our program is just as meaningful, even though we aren’t hitting those directly, has been a big challenge.”

Another organization also advocated for the value of its book distribution services, making an argument to its connection to the tutoring space: “[T]he tutoring programs and the programs that are working to build summer programming for literacy development and the broader debate around what is the science of reading? You need books for all that. And so don’t give books short shrift. They need to exist.”

Discussion

The current findings reinforce the importance of strong, intentional partnerships between schools and CBOs to facilitate services, consistent with the existing literature (Epstein, 2011; Noam et al., 2003; Noam et al., 2004; Ruhr & Danforth, 2024; Sanders, 2006; Valli et al., 2016). However, they also mirror findings of others (Anthony & Morra, 2016; Ruhr & Danforth, 2024) that school partners may devalue CBO services when they do not closely align with school curricula and programming. The perceived lack of support from schools regarding holistic CBO programming arose in the present study despite a regional context that included shared emphasis on literacy development and critical pathways for communication to develop shared goals and align support, as has been recommended in the literature (Ruhr & Danforth, 2024).

Programming offered by CBOs is most impactful when it is multifaceted and includes enhancements, extensions, and intentional learning (Noam et al., 2003). Multifaceted programming supports multiple aspects of child development, addressing a broad range

of children’s needs beyond academic skills recovery and acceleration. The most meaningful progress comes when individuals across spheres work collectively on shared goals such as student achievement, home-school communication, and family well-being (Epstein, 2011), and CBOs that provide afterschool programming hold a critical intermediary role between the school and home spheres (Noam et al., 2003). However, the present study, which occurred post-COVID-19 and in the midst of a heightened focus on high-impact, high-dosage literacy tutoring as a recovery effort, underscored tensions in school-CBO partnerships, grounded in mismatches between school curricular priorities and CBO programming. Although extended programming is a valuable form of afterschool support (Noam et al., 2003) and is implemented by many CBOs, the present study is the first, to our knowledge, to reveal that an intensive form

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of extended programming—high-impact high-dosage tutoring—might be at the heart of school-CBO conflict related to curricular priorities and alignment in a post-COVID-19 recovery context. High-impact high-dosage tutoring requires resources (e.g., evidence-based programs, high-quality training and coaching) that

can be difficult for nonprofit CBOs to acquire given their limited funding and staffing constraints. Some CBOs in this study addressed capacity constraints by partnering with others whose programming already included intensive tutoring; nevertheless, perceived tensions centered on conflicting school-CBO curricular priorities persisted.

Limitations

Findings of the present study should be considered in light of limitations. First, this study focused exclusively on nonprofit CBOs; findings may not reflect other types of school-organization partnerships, and CBO perceptions of educational entities’ foci and values in programming could be misinformed. Second, our study was based in a single county in North Carolina—our results may be limited to the targeted region, which may be unique especially when it comes to support for district-community partnerships. We provided detailed contextual information to promote

transferability considerations. In addition, Phase 1 data collection occurred with only nine of 32 eligible CBOs; their perspectives may not fully reflect those of similar CBOs. Last, we may have missed smaller organizations without a web presence or name recognition in our search, thus unintentionally underrepresenting the viewpoints of these organizations.

Implications

Findings of this study related to tensions in partnerships between CBOs and educational entities suggests the need for clearer communication about rationales for district initiatives and program selection, and stronger strategic planning and partnership around the interconnectedness of services (Jochim et al., 2023; Ruhr & Danforth, 2024). Educational entities and/or funders may also require support in considering the ways in which holistic programming, beyond high-impact high-dosage tutoring, can promote student success. Conversations and partnership around enriching and intentional afterschool experiences and family support could result in endorsement of a broader array of afterschool programming, reserving high-impact, high-dosage tutoring for strategic deployment rather than a blanket requirement. A regional literacy consortium or collaborative led by a trusted other (e.g., a community initiative like Read Charlotte, or a college of education) could provide networking opportunities for school and CBO partners in a third space, and could help establish a shared overall vision of how students can benefit from the multifaceted and complementary services offered by CBOs.

When CBOs with a holistic approach to supporting students are faced with expectations for providing high-impact, high-dosage literacy tutoring using evidence-based practices or programs, they may be able to turn to other CBOs or colleges of education in their region for support with adoption and implementation. That is, CBOs need not abandon their multifaceted programming to adhere to a narrow conception of literacy support, but where literacy proficiency is low, incorporating research-supported instruction and high-impact tutoring can make a difference in their ability to receive funding, partner with educational entities, and ultimately affect student outcomes.

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