



Strong Start, Strong Readers

An Interview with the William Penn Foundation

Georgia Hall, managing editor of *Afterschool Matters* and director of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, interviewed two members of the William Penn Foundation's Great Learning grant program: Elliot Weinbaum, program director, and Amanda Charles, senior program associate. The William Penn Foundation generously funded publication of this issue of *Afterschool Matters*.

Georgia: The William Penn Foundation believes that all children deserve to have access to high-quality education and to experience academic success. How did Strong Start, Strong Readers become a priority direction?

Elliot: Children and youth have been a priority

of the William Penn Foundation since its founding in 1945. In 2015, we went through a strategy review to make sure we were using the foundation's resources effectively. There were really three steps.

First, we looked back at our grants over the previous ten years. Where had we seen our grants get traction to produce outcomes for children and youth?

Second, we looked at the ecosystem here in Philadelphia. The foundation has always been committed to Philadelphia. So how can we address a real need? Where is there momentum for the foundation to build on?

Third, we looked at the research on the transitional points in children's development where additional investments could make a difference.

So with that combination of past grant-making, the current landscape, and current research, we saw that work supporting young children was our niche and opportunity. We saw a need to invest early in children's lives and set the foundation for their success. That's how we landed on supporting kindergarten readiness and third-grade read-

ing. From there, we identified six strategies under Strong Start, Strong Readers. One of those was to build literacy-rich out-of-school time (OST) environments.

Georgia: How can literacy-rich OST environments support in-school academic and literacy learning?

Amanda: Children spend 80 percent of their time outside of school, not only at home but at parks, libraries, bus stops, corner stores, and so on. These spaces offer key opportunities for learning. Our strategies focus on transforming spaces and building momentum to support language and literacy development wherever families spend time. These spaces can support vocabulary growth, social-emotional skill development, and general knowledge—all things children need to enter school ready to learn and achieve success.

By offering content-rich programming in community settings, we give children a knowledge base to draw on in the classroom and support learning in school.

Elliot: Sometimes we talk about *constrained* and *unconstrained* skills. A *constrained* skill like learning the alphabet, learning phonics—those are things that schools are uniquely suited for. All kids have to master them, and they can master them in a certain amount of time with certain approaches.

Unconstrained skills are those that are always growing, like vocabulary and comprehension. This type of skill-building goes on our whole lives. OST programs build unconstrained skills that complement and support the constrained skills. In addition, much of the [Literacy-Rich Environments portfolio](#) is about growing motivation and enthusiasm, as well as increasing opportunities, for reading and language development in order to build a literacy foundation upon which schools can build.

Georgia: What are the goals of the foundation's initiatives in community-based organizations, libraries, museums, clinics, and community centers to promote children's language and literacy skills?

Amanda: Short-term outcomes include more adult-child

conversations, expansion of vocabulary, and an increase in motivation and confidence related to learning in general. We hope that our initiatives can serve as models to other community organizations, decision-makers, and policymakers to replicate around the country. Our support of research and evaluation of these initiatives helps make that possible.

Thinking about longer-term goals, we hope to see more community-based organizations in Philadelphia adopt a focus on early literacy and language development. We hope that these initiatives give organization leaders and program staff the skills and tools to create literacy-rich programming. We want to encourage more high-quality literacy-rich learning environments across the city.

Georgia: How do the foundation's literacy-rich environments projects support the professional development of adult staff in grantee organizations?

Amanda: We are working across Philadelphia to support OST professionals. We work with organizations looking to make an intentional shift in their work toward early literacy.

One approach is to offer coaching that blends literacy skill building with program quality building. Program leaders receive one-on-one in-person coaching with real-time feedback, along with guidance on data collection. The strategies that coaches foster improve program implementation and support continuous quality improvement. With that groundwork, the OST programs can engage in literacy skill-building strategies and practices.

Georgia: What were your favorite OST learning spaces growing up?

Amanda: My younger brothers and I spent a lot of time in Timber Town, a playground near where I grew up. This environment was made entirely of wood. It lent itself to a lot of dramatic play, like chasing dragons.

Elliot: I grew up here in Philadelphia and attended the children's concerts given by the Philadelphia Orchestra. The conductor would explain aspects of the orchestra and the instruments, and a local artist would draw alongside to illustrate the music as it was happening. These were educational and wonderfully fun experiences!