

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **Nashville Public Library Foundation Early Literacy Project**



Nashville Public Library (NPL) has a long history of leadership in children’s services and early literacy. With thousands of children’s books and resources, a beautiful downtown library, 20 neighborhood branches, and innovative programs like puppet shows that have been a feature of NPL for more than 70 years, it is clear that helping young children become “reading ready” is in the DNA of NPL.

In 2000, NPL redoubled its commitment to early literacy by creating a program called Bringing Books to Life (BBTL). Since its inception, BBTL has partnered with hundreds of childcare centers across Davidson County, worked with thousands of children to help them build a foundation for reading, and currently serves 177 childcare centers across the county. NPL’s partner in this effort is the Nashville Public Library Foundation (NPLF), which has provided private-sector funding to pay for the many creative programs that have made NPL such an important community resource.

By 2021, thanks to the dedicated efforts of the BBTL team, the program had emerged as a national model for innovation in preparing preschoolers to read. As a result, the library was considering greatly expanding BBTL and all of its early literacy programs.

The goal of the planned expansion was to take BBTL to scale, creating a model that would allow it to support all of Nashville’s 400 licensed childcare centers and beyond. NPLF was ready to lead a major fundraising campaign. To



ensure the expansion would have the greatest impact possible, NPL hired an expert consultant to conduct an independent evaluation of all its early literacy programs, including BBTL.

That evaluation was undertaken by, at the time, Vanderbilt University Education Specialist Lisa Wiltshire. Ms. Wiltshire worked closely with the BBTL staff to explore the program in depth, while also collecting and synthesizing thousands of pages of research on early literacy. The result is a manual of best practices for preparing young children to read, as well as recommendations for expanding BBTL. The ultimate outcome of this year-long study is *Begin Bright*.

## About The White Paper

The 66-page white paper made clear the urgent need to address this issue - students who are not reading proficiently by third grade are four times as likely to drop out of high school. Today, only 30 percent of Tennessee students are reading at grade level. Also today, most early literacy instruction begins in elementary school. And yet, the study found, "recent developments in neuroscience have illuminated the first five years as the most pivotal and dynamic for brain development." Providing children with the necessary building blocks to get them ready to read before Kindergarten means they will be excited to learn how to read when they get there. The report concludes, BBTL is demonstrating what early literacy success can look like.

In its summary, the report said:

"To significantly increase the percentage of children reading proficiently in third grade, all children must have access to high quality early language and literacy experiences in the first five years of life." (That doesn't mean all children who experience early literacy instruction will read at grade level in third grade. It does mean they will be given a significantly better chance than those who do not receive that instruction.)

## Building Blocks of Early Literacy

The study next explores the complex and interrelated building blocks of literacy. It identifies two key categories: first, the skills needed by young children to learn to read, and second, the teaching practices required to develop those skills. It then explores both in detail. To do that, it relies on a thorough review of best practices from *Bringing Books to Life*, as well as research into published national and statewide standards and an exhaustive study of primary research, myriad reports and scholarly articles.

**SKILLS.** It divides the different sets of skills into four groups - 1. Foundational skills, 2. Reading skills, 3. Early writing skills, and 4. Speaking and listening skills. All are contributors to a child's reading readiness.

The foundational skills begin with the most basic - "understanding print, holding a book right-side-up, turning pages one at a time and front to back." Also, "phonological awareness - an understanding of spoken words, syllables and sounds." All the way to more advanced skills, such as "word composition - the ability to know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills when encoding words."

The same depth of detail is focused on specific reading skills, early writing skills and speaking and listening skills. In all, 35 individual standards - the skills necessary for literacy - are detailed in the report.

**TEACHING PRACTICES.** Once the skills have been set forth, the report turns its attention to the teaching practices that are the "essential drivers" for the development of these early literacy skills.

**The nine evidence-based early literacy teaching practices are:**

- **Oral language development** - adults talking with and listening to children
- **Interactive read-alouds**
- **Dialogic reading** - adults asking questions that call on children to predict what's going to happen in a story, analyze what has happened and even make personal connections to the story



- **Selecting high quality, age-appropriate texts**
- **Purposeful practice with reading**
- **Phonics and letter instructions** - activities that support word recognition, letter sound identification and imitation
- **Text extensions** - including author studies and teaching that delves into what's behind the text
- **Purposeful practice with writing**
- **Interactive play** - role playing among children, making it fun

After laying out these nine practices, the report reminds us, "(t)he two common denominators for (these) evidence-based early literacy teaching practices are books and conversation... (and) the important qualifier for both is quality."

The study concludes that the teaching practices, the reading skills which are the goal, and the common denominators of books and conversation are all present every day in the interactions of young children with Bringing Books to Life.

**BBTL has mastered the basics of early literacy - getting children ready to read.**

The study closes with five specific recommendations for expanding the program.

**Mini Libraries** BBTL has traveled to hundreds of Davidson County childcare centers for the better part of two decades, bringing books, puppet shows and librarians to help young children learn the basics of reading. By providing on-site mini-libraries with quality, age-appropriate books, the program could solve one of the most difficult challenges of early literacy education - access to books.

**Teacher Training:** BBTL is already very invested in training teachers and parents, with multiple workshops and one-on-one sessions to share strategies to help children prepare to read. The study has specific recommendations for expanding this outreach effort, including creation of an on line teaching portal, hosting literacy workshops in new areas and developing new partnerships with other education-focused organizations.

**Parent-Family Support** BBTL currently hosts parent workshops at elementary schools, childcare centers, preschool programs, at the Main Library, and at library branches. Research shows parents who participate in the workshops read more to their children, help them with writing skills, and visit the library more often. The study recommends expanding these offerings to more locations. It also recommends creating an on line parent portal.



**Research Pilot** Take a representative group of children from a certain demographic and immerse them in a specific literacy strategy. For example, select a neighborhood serving a high percentage of low-income families and immerse young children in a specific teaching practice taught by BBTL staff, such as dialogic reading, to see the impact on parent behavior and child literacy.

**Program Assessment** Collect data from workshop participants, focus groups, interviews, surveys, and more, and with that data, develop methods to measure the success of young children as they progress toward reading.

## Conclusion

Nashville Public Library is uniquely positioned to play an essential role in meeting the need for early literacy skill-building in Nashville. NPL's decades-long commitment to engaging with young readers before they learn to read, and the remarkable success of Bringing Books to Life, provide an ideal foundation from which to leverage early literacy programming to a much larger audience of young children and their families.

That is the mission of Begin Bright, and its strategies and plans can be found in the recommendations of this report. The creation of little libraries at childcare centers, teacher and parent training programs, and the ongoing analysis and research to provide evidence-based guidance, are all part of the vision of Begin Bright. Every Begin Bright program will meet state and local evaluation standards.

With these tools in place, Begin Bright is poised to build a program to ultimately help all Nashville children become reading ready by the time they enter kindergarten.