Building Literacy Beyond Our Gates

University-led partnership addresses reading proficiency in California’s Central Valley
35% of third-grade students in San Joaquin county are reading at grade level.

“…we visited Stockton, California shortly after the city had declared bankruptcy. …we walked into the room and the business community was there, United Way was there, institutions of higher [learning were] there… everyone was in the room. … It was simply the most moving meeting because here was a city that was in bankruptcy, a city that you think would be shutting down, and everybody came into the room because they understood that the future of their city was dependent upon what happens with their youngest kids. And they were determined that, no matter what happened, that they would invest in their youngest children. …I remember Stockton, and it has made a difference in the way I do my work and why I do my work.”

— RALPH SMITH

Executive Vice President, Annie E. Casey Foundation

White House Summit on Early Education

**BUILD** the capacity of nonprofit and other partners to design, implement, evaluate and expand programs that empower families to realize children’s educational potential.

*3.4% increase in 2017 in third-grade reading levels*

*5% increase in 2016 in third-grade reading levels*

*All-America City Award*

**CONVENE** individuals, communities and organizations to improve education and the quality of life in San Joaquin County.

- Coalition of 80 community partners
- Annual dialogues with national experts
- Business/Education summits

**ADVOCATE** by raising the visibility of critical issues, including school readiness, school attendance, summer enrichment, parent engagement and grade-level reading.

- Coalition of San Joaquin Children’s Alliance, including a fact sheet and the “Children’s Bill of Rights”
- Community health needs assessment now includes literacy
- Annual literacy report card

*1 out of 300*

Beyond Our Gates is the only third-grade reading initiative, out of 300 in the country, being led by a university.
Luz Saucedo has been a parent educator with El Concilio, a Latino-based social services provider in Stockton, for at least 20 years. More recently she has noticed a growing enthusiasm for books and reading among children in the homes she visits. When she arrives, children will run to their rooms and grab the book they are reading to show her.

But this isn’t an isolated occurrence, says Desiree Fernandes, the former program coordinator for Family and Childhood Wellness at El Concilio. All of the parent educators she worked with say they have noticed a difference in how parents and their children are relating to each other over books.

“There is a vast improvement in the bond the parents notice with their children. Being able to sit down and read with their child has created a stronger connection for many families,” Fernandes says. “Some have shared that fathers have become more involved with reading to their child. Children have been seen waiting by the door with their Raising A Reader bags and their books for their dads to return home from work and read to them.”

Raising A Reader, a book exchange program in which families get to borrow bags of books and become involved with their local library, is just one of the early literacy programs supported through Beyond Our Gates, a community-wide effort to improve early literacy outcomes among children in California’s Central Valley and specifically the city of Stockton.

In 2011, University of the Pacific President Pamela Eibeck launched the effort. Over time, it has involved multiple cross-sector partners, such as city government, libraries, the county health department, the business community, school districts and even the regional bus system, in promoting literacy practices and working toward the goal of raising reading proficiency levels among local children.

Eibeck says Beyond Our Gates has been an effort to unify the variety of efforts in the community related to early literacy and to show partners and community leaders how they can support the goals.

“There’s a greater awareness in our community of the need to pay attention to our children,” she says.
Beyond Our Gates has had multiple components, one of which is a mini-grant program made available through funding from the James Irvine Foundation. A $300,000 grant from the foundation for the 2016–17 school year supported, for example, the Powers Scholars Academy, which focuses on preventing summer learning loss among disadvantaged students.

Tuleburg Press, a publishing company, helped children become authors through a summer program called BiblioKids. Not only did they make five to seven books during the week-long camp, but the children were also able to take home bookmaking supplies for the next time inspiration hits.

The funds have also supported early literacy training for representatives from multiple agencies. “It’s been really helpful having one organization as the coordinator, as the backbone,” says Kay Ruhstaller, the executive director of the Family Resource and Referral Center, which advocates for and helps families find quality programs for their children. “So much of this is overlapping. It’s not one person’s work; it’s more of a tapestry.”

The Child Abuse Prevention Council of San Joaquin, which runs Head Start and preschool classrooms, also used a mini-grant to provide Raising A Reader in multiple sites. “Some of these kids don’t have books in their home every day,” says Laprice Brown, the council’s director of early education.

The Irvine Foundation recently renewed $300,000 in funding for Beyond Our Gates for 2018–19.

**Simple, but powerful messages**

A goal of Beyond Our Gates has been to engage parents in the multiple ways they can support children’s vocabulary development, oral language
and early reading skills. “Literacy doesn’t just happen in a box, in a vacuum,” Ruhstaller says.

Using the research-based Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) campaign, a project of the Public Library Association and the Association for Library Services to Children, Beyond Our Gates had a solid foundation on which to build and adapt its own messages. ECRR focuses on the five early literacy practices of talking, reading, singing, drawing and playing. Incorporating a drawing of a tiger, Pacific’s mascot, into its materials, San Joaquin Reads encourages parents and caregivers to talk, read, sing, draw and play with young children.

“That five words are so incredibly powerful,” says Lani Schiff-Ross, the executive director of First 5 San Joaquin, which administers funding for health, education and other programs serving children from birth to age five. “If we did more to promote those five words, we would have a different society.”

Schiff-Ross adds that she thinks those simple messages have the greatest potential to leave a lasting impact on the community and that, if she could, she would hire someone just to develop community partnerships focusing on those literacy practices. “How do we keep working on those messages for different audiences?” she asks.

**Community gatherings**

Beyond Our Gates is led by an executive committee that includes representatives from multiple organizations and focuses on setting goals and strategies for the initiative.

Members such as Jamie Baiocchi, the director of early childhood and support for the San Joaquin County Office of Education, have helped to provide the committee with data on young children in the county, preschool participation, assessment and other issues. Baiocchi says she has also worked to raise awareness about pre-reading skills and the importance of engaging parents in supporting their children’s learning well before kindergarten.

A larger community council includes representation from the roughly 80 partner organizations involved in Beyond Our Gates.

“What’s key is that everyone who comes to those meetings goes to other meeting” and shares the key messages from the campaign even if they don’t realize it,” Schiff-Ross says.

The campaign has also convened community “dialogues” featuring speakers, such as Ralph Smith, executive vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and managing director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, in 2012. More recently, Kevin Slattery of Providence Talks came to share his city’s effort to increase parent-child interaction and improve oral language development in the early years. The events give participants opportunities to discuss how they can support the goals of the campaign.

Family Day in the Park, a Stockton tradition that gathers approximately 20,000 community members for a day of celebrating learning and literacy, has been another opportunity for Beyond Our Gates to reach out to families and reinforce their role in supporting children’s early literacy experiences.

*San Joaquin County Superintendent of Schools James Mousalimas addresses a Beyond Our Gates gathering at University of the Pacific.*
all Pre-K through eighth-grade schools in San Joaquin county’s 14 districts, as well as to independent schools and early-childhood programs. Baiocchi and others urged the committee to include preschool programs to help communicate the message that regular attendance in preschool can help create good habits when children reach elementary school. Experts on chronic absenteeism also stress that community-wide approaches are necessary to prevent students from missing too many days of school.

Schools register to participate and, if their school has perfect attendance in the month of September, students are recognized and receive a bookmark. Students can also enter a drawing for prizes, such as a Kindle Fire, a bicycle and helmet and gift certificates. When the challenge began in 2013, 40 schools participated and 10,000 students had perfect attendance. In Sept. 2017, there were 82 schools registered and the number of students with perfect attendance had more than doubled to 22,000. Even local sports teams are supporting the initiative. The Stockton Heat, an American Hockey League affiliate, presented eligible students with a voucher for two game tickets.

Encouraging attendance

In addition to focusing on early literacy development, Beyond Our Gates partners have worked to raise awareness about the importance of regular school attendance, which in the early years also contributes to whether children are performing at grade level.

Every Day Counts, Beyond Our Gates’ attendance challenge initiative, is open to
Collective impact initiatives, such as Beyond Our Gates, not only set goals and implement programs to achieve those goals, but they also let partners and community leaders know whether their efforts are having a positive effect as well as where more work is needed.

Every year, Beyond Our Gates publishes *Open Books: San Joaquin Literacy Report Card*, a document that clearly communicates where the county stands on indicators, such as third-grade reading proficiency, maternal educational level, pre-school enrollment and truancy rates. The data are compared to the state level and are displayed with green arrows pointing up or red arrows pointing down to show whether or not the trend is moving in the right direction.

“We want to have measurable outcomes,” says Jane Butterfield, the CEO of the Business Council of San Joaquin, adding that Beyond Our Gates supports the Council’s mission to improve the quality of life in the community. “If you have a healthy population, you have a healthy business climate.”

Beyond Our Gates also complements the work of San Joaquin A+, a nonprofit, volunteer organization supported by the Business Council and other community leaders to improve school programs and services related to literacy, history, the arts and school readiness.

“The best outcome so far for Beyond Our Gates is that it has gained the community’s trust,” says Sue Grupe de Polo, one of the directors of San Joaquin A+. “I sincerely hope the university keeps up the great work and the pressure on the community to collaborate.”

As a city leader, Dan Wright, a member of the Stockton City Council and educator who served as acting superintendent of the Stockton Unified School District, credits Beyond Our Gates with not allowing the inspiration that comes after a visit from someone like Ralph Smith to fade away. “I love the momentum that’s been maintained,” he says. “This has not shifted from day one.”

### All-America City

Receiving an All-America City Award in 2017 from the National Civic League, which partnered with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to focus on third-grade reading proficiency, also validates the work Beyond Our Gates has done to involve multiple partners in focusing on literacy, Wright says.
As an educator, Wright says it’s easy to see whether or not a child arriving in kindergarten has come from an environment in which early literacy and learning has been a priority.

“Teachers struggled with this drastic difference—those who had preschool and [those with] little exposure before school and didn’t know how to hold a pencil, had no concepts of print and no socialization skills,” he says, adding that he would like to see more preschool slots open for three-year-olds.

“Stockton is a great community and it’s a community,” said Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs, who attended the All-America City conference. “I know intimately well the challenges we face and how we still continue to rise and be resilient and now are looked upon as a model for the nation. Not that we’re a perfect city and have everything figured out, but we are working toward solutions and that’s something to be applauded.”

Planning for sustainability

Now, almost six years into the work, leaders have identified the steps necessary for maintaining the momentum among community partners focusing on literacy. These steps, outlined in a strategic plan, include collecting data to better understand how various organizations support literacy and how families prioritize early literacy activities with their children, by going to the library, for example.

Beyond Our Gates is working with the Gladys L. Benerd School of Education at University of the Pacific and other experts to create a bank of resources, such as tip sheets and summer learning guides, for organizations to use. Beyond Our Gates will continue the mini-grant program to help agencies start and pilot early literacy initiatives.

Beyond Our Gates will also continue to hold gatherings, such as the annual dialogues and a business-education luncheon, to further identify shared goals and to “build a platform for advocacy around common interests,” according to the plan.
The scope of Beyond Our Gates

Beyond Our Gates has given the region a boost in each of the service sectors. For example, the adjacent graph highlights the sheer number of services the associated organizations provide to the community. Overwhelmingly, these organizations devote time to family literacy, recognizing the important role that families play in children’s literacy learning.

But their activities do not stop there. These organizations provide mental health counseling, job training and family support services, among other activities. Together, they offer important, comprehensive support to enhance children’s education.

The collective model

Probably one of the most beneficial aspects of the initiative has been to bring groups together—a sharing of goals among the community-based organizations. In this respect, Beyond Our Gates has recognized the needs of the whole child and what it takes to support their aspirations and achievement. As one leader indicated, “As we are committed to improving the quality of life in our community, educating the entire population is a high priority. Beyond Our Gates provides that focus, which is critical in order to achieve our goals of increasing educational attainment throughout the community.”

And as another put it, “The networking opportunities have been amazing. The quarterly opportunities to interact with civic and business leaders has really helped us to advocate for different policy issues.” Helping children develop a motivation to read has been a collective goal among organizations.

All seem devoted to enhancing the odds that children will be successful in school. These joint goals have been supported through the organizations’ collaboration with Pacific. As one organization indicated, “Having University of the Pacific as an institution of higher learning has helped our organization when advocating on different policy issues to positively impact funding for children.”

### Primary Goals of Organizations (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Families have and use technology</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are motivated to read</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children have health insurance</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Families are engaged in their community’s decisions and activities</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities are safe and supportive</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children are succeeding in early grades through 3rd grade</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are safe and nurtured/Prevent and reduce child abuse</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are healthy and developing on track</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are ready to be successful in school</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families are strong and supported</td>
<td>35%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As a result, organizations have worked collaboratively to provide many services to children and their families. Among the most dramatic has been the enormous increase in programming for families and their young children.

The Beyond Our Gates initiative has created a bold and well-articulated set of goals, which have been adopted by a large coalition of organizations in the San Joaquin region. As a result, it has successfully enhanced the activities, services and skills for families and their children. Collectively, these organizations are on a trajectory to improve children's opportunities to learn and increase their reading performance by the end of third grade.

**Recommendations for the future**

Beyond Our Gates has proven to be a powerful force for early literacy. At the same time, organizational members recommended priorities for the upcoming years.

Together, the initiative might consider the following next steps:

- Consider a stronger effort to improve literacy-teaching skills for parents and other adults. Parents who have difficulty reading to their children are less likely to do so.
- Help parents understand/recognize the expectations and standards related to early literacy.
- Promote the visibility of the Beyond Our Gates initiative through social networking and media events.
- Create greater connections between Pacific students and community organizations. Consider recruiting volunteer tutors who might operate directly in the neighborhoods where at-risk children reside.
- Help expand the summer learning loss-prevention program through promoting community awareness of resources.
- Continue to gain support from local policy makers from all branches of local government and help them take greater ownership for children’s academic success.
- Work on exciting new initiatives and programs, such as the recently announced Stockton Scholars college tuition program, with the realization that education is the means for Stockton and San Joaquin county to move forward as a community.

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**Average Percentage of Services and Information Provided by Organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Sector</th>
<th>Average Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training opportunities on evidence-based reading practices</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer learning activities</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on technology</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming for families and young children</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health information</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to books and other print resources</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about child development</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials and resources related to children’s learning</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition and food support</td>
<td>12%</td>
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</tbody>
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**High Priorities for Organizations**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helping families with issues related to health, safety and nutrition</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoting the importance of home-school communication</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sure that families have a library card</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging families to use their home language</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting families in learning to read with their children</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that families have expectations for their child’s literacy development</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting ongoing parent-child dialogue and conversations</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping families create literacy-friendly home environments</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Susan B. Neuman is a specialist in early literacy development whose research and teaching interests include early childhood policy, curriculum, and early reading instruction for children who live in poverty.

In her role as the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, Neuman established the Early Reading First program, developed the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program, and was responsible for all activities in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act.

She received her doctorate from University of the Pacific.

In 2016, she was commissioned to do an assessment of the Beyond Our Gates program.

Neuman has written more than 100 articles, and authored and edited 11 books, including:

- The three-volume *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (Guilford Press)
- *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk* (Teachers College Press, 2009)
- *Educating the Other America* (Brookes, 2008)
- *Multimedia and Literacy Development* (Taylor & Francis, 2008)