



Holyoke Community Schools: Strong Partners for Success in Early Literacy

Improving early childhood literacy is the goal that drives the work of the [Holyoke Public Schools](#) and its partners. Last school year, the Massachusetts district re-launched the [Holyoke Early Literacy Initiative](#) (HELI), a comprehensive strategy for increasing early reading proficiency rates and reducing the achievement gap. Early childhood literacy has been a long-term issue for Holyoke, with the district lagging significantly behind the state in literacy rates for many years.

Expansion of the community school strategy is at the heart of the early literacy strategy. Holyoke opened its first community school in 2009. Two more community schools then followed. In 2013 a new administration decided to adopt the community school strategy via HELI in order to address the early literacy crisis.

"We believe that in order to support every child in our schools, we must strengthen our relationships with families and community organizations. We also recognize that the gaps created due to language-deprived environments are predisposing our students to more academic and social emotional challenges in our schools. We believe that the full-service community school concept is a proven strategy to align resources and to bring accountability for the programming and services available for students." - Dr. Sergio Paez, Holyoke Superintendent of Schools.

Under HELI, the district is uniting students, families, teachers, district leaders, and community partners to work toward real results in student learning. Holyoke leaders are creating a cultural shift within the district offices so all Holyoke Public School personnel members recognize community and family partnerships as essential resources to fulfill its mission of enhancing student learning.

Just how is Holyoke organizing partnerships at the district and school levels to achieve these results?

District Level

Megan Harding is the district's full service community school director. Harding oversees the infrastructure that coordinates community and family partnerships across the city and supports the individual FSCSs in their early literacy approaches. According to Harding, "We are using the full-service community school strategy to build a coalition of people and programs and learn together about instructional practices, program designs, and accountability for improving the reading proficiency of our early learners."

Under HELI, the district utilizes workgroups to align resources for community schools. Each workgroup comprises a diverse set of leaders, including: district leaders, community members, partners, parents, and school staff.

There are four major HELI workgroups: 0-5 kindergarten readiness, instructional partners, family engagement, and attending for literacy. Although each workgroup has one specifically targeted function, they all address the core objective of improving reading proficiency. For instance, the Family Engagement Workgroup has developed a home visiting program, a HELI parent education project, and a HELI parent campaign in order to engage families in supporting their children's literacy development.

The Instructional Partners Workgroup most directly uses the community school strategy to align and improve approaches to literacy instruction during both the school day and during out-of-school time. District members include the assistant superintendent, the district director of early learning, and the director of English language arts, while partners include after-school and summer school program directors, local colleges and universities, and directors of agencies who provide in-class supplemental instruction (such as Enchanted Circle Theatre). The group meets monthly to develop concrete trainings and resources for instructional partners so that literacy instruction is embedded in all settings.

Their work includes recruiting early literacy tutors and developing an aligned system of HELI tutor training and communication. The workgroup provides a space for district staff to collaborate with professors of teacher education programs and train student teachers on early literacy best practices. These orientations include tours of the Holyoke schools and neighborhoods so student teachers learn about the cultural contexts in which children learn. The workgroup also supports out-of-school time programming by providing a list of literacy-focused activities for after-school tutors (e.g., university student volunteers).

Partnerships at the School Site

Multiple actors collaborate at the school level to ensure their own community school is addressing its distinct needs in literacy improvement.

Holyoke employs Full-Service Community School Managers (these positions may be called “community school coordinator” or “resource coordinator” in other communities) who play an instrumental role in improving early literacy work. All FSCS managers are members of the school's Instructional Leadership Team, which develops and implements the school's improvement plan. Furthermore, the manager serves as a communication liaison among teachers, the Instructional Leadership Team, and community partners. After the manager assesses school-wide needs in improving literacy instruction, she utilizes her relationships with community partners to coordinate teacher/community partnerships for better learning experiences that impact literacy.

School faculty are fully integrated into the community school strategy. Faculty participate on school-level workgroups that focus on distinct school priorities, such as early literacy, early college awareness or culture and climate. “Faculty representatives” are also appointed at full-service community schools by grade level. These representatives promote awareness of community school activities and opportunities in order to support school wide classroom practice. Through this strategy, teachers are able to recognize the community school approach as a key asset and driver of improved literacy at Holyoke.

Community partners are an essential component to the HELI strategy, as they deliver the individual services and supports to children and parents within each school. They help teachers create more learning

opportunities and the conditions for learning. For example, the Hampshire College 1st Grade Partnership places undergraduate students, who are enrolled in Hampshire's developmental psychology courses, into first-grade classrooms. Not only do these students support classroom instruction, but they also create weekly, bilingual communication strategies about how families can engage with the classroom content from that week. The Mt. Holyoke Thought Partner Project also serves to create relationship-based pairings between Mt. Holyoke's university professors and K-3 classroom teachers to support practice.

Other Holyoke partners include: the teacher education department at University of Massachusetts; community pre-K providers, such as Head Start and Valley Opportunity Council; local research organizations, such as Strategies for Children; and other community-based organizations, such as the YMCA, Homework House and others.

In Holyoke's existing community schools, there is no split between academic and non-academic supports when it comes to defining the role of community partners. In fact, in order to be approved as a classroom instructional partners, each FSCS establishes a protocol to ensure that the programs of potential partnerships are designed to improve outcomes for all students, with a particular focus on the district's large number of English language learners and students with disabilities. Their programs must be designed with clear assessment and evaluation measures and protocols. Better learning is the clear goal that drives partners' actions.

Data-Driven Approach

HELI uses data for continuous improvement. Each workgroup establishes objectives and progress reports on a monthly basis to the HELI Leadership Team. In addition, every HELI partner is held accountable to their own alignment with HELI objectives.

One of the community partners, Strategies for Children, provides technical assistance through a self-assessment process they created in collaboration with Dr. Nonie Lesaux from the Harvard Graduate School of Education: the Program Design and Evaluation Tool (PDET). The PDET is a multi-stage process where district and community partners assess early literacy progress, analyze program quality, refine program design, and work to ensure the coordination of services collectively add up to impact. The process began with a community-wide mapping exercise to assess Holyoke's early literacy partnering programs and continues to strengthen efforts to match inputs to desired outcomes.

In Holyoke, community partnerships have become synonymous with better learning. Holyoke is determined to expand learning opportunities, reduce achievement gaps, and use the community school strategy as a vehicle for educational improvement. Their results-based approach has created a culture of high expectations for learning at community schools and among partners.

Since re-launching HELI last school year, district leaders have focused on establishing a supportive and sustainable infrastructure for an early literacy-themed FSCS strategy, and they expect to see its results unfold throughout this school year. They remain hopeful for strong early literacy gains, and they're calling on all relevant stakeholders to achieve this goal. In fact, the district's motto is "A community working together."