

Promoting Equitable Access to Early Literacy Supports

Evaluation of the Early Literacy Network Hubs



Introduction

In 2020, Michigan was one of 20 states selected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to receive a Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) renewal grant. Beginning in September 2021, this grant funded the Birth to Five Early Literacy Network Hubs, among other Michigan Department of Education (MDE) activities, under the state’s broad goal of preparing children to enter kindergarten. The goal of the Network Hubs initiative is to increase equitable access to early literacy resources and supports in the state and improve early literacy outcomes for children. As part of Michigan’s PDG B-5 evaluation, MDE contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct an evaluation of the Network Hubs initiative. This brief describes the findings from the evaluation, which focused on the initiative’s implementation lessons.

About the Early Literacy Network Hubs

Improving the literacy of young children is one of the eight goals in *Michigan’s Top 10 Strategic Education Plan* (MDE, 2020). Although there are a wide variety of programs and services designed to promote early literacy in Michigan, they lack coordination and a centralized access point. The purpose of the Network Hubs initiative is to promote an equitable early literacy system in Michigan and ultimately contribute to improved literacy outcomes for children.

The Network Hubs distribute early literacy resources, including books; offer early literacy professional development; and engage partners to support early literacy efforts. The Hubs also are expected to coordinate with other organizations to promote collaboration within their respective regions to address disparities in access to early literacy resources and supports and build a network of partners working together in the area. The state required each Network Hub to partner with local libraries, the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators, Great Start Collaboratives (GSCs), and Great Start Parent Coalitions (GSPCs) and encouraged their partnership with other local organizations.¹ The state provided an initial 3-month grant of \$60,000 in 2021 to each Network Hub, followed by a 12-month grant of \$120,000 to support work in 2022. In addition, the state supported a consultant to

¹ GSCs are coalitions of organizations that serve children and families prenatal to age 8. The purpose of the GSCs is to build and support local early childhood systems. A complementary group—the GSPCs—comprises parents and caregivers who engage in early childhood system efforts, support the work of the GSCs, and help engage other families in early childhood services.

provide ongoing technical assistance to the Network Hubs, including facilitation of a monthly joint meeting with the Hub leads.

There are 10 Network Hubs, aligned with the prosperity regions identified in Michigan’s 2013 Regional Prosperity Initiative. This initiative established a common set of geographic boundaries in the state that encourages public, private, and nonprofit partners to develop and foster regional economies by identifying regionally aligned strategies, goals, objectives, and projects.

An intermediate school district (ISD) served as the lead for seven of the 10 Network Hubs; a family service agency led another Hub, and a resource center led two other Hubs. However, three of the 10 Hubs were closely affiliated with a GSC in some way (e.g., the lead agency held the contract for the GSC, and leads worked predominantly for the GSC, or the Hub lead split their time between the GSC and other responsibilities). It also is important to note that the Hub lead agencies did not all engage in the initiative in the same way. For example, leadership could be centralized or distributed. The leads of one Network Hub shared that they distributed the grant funds equally among its multiple counties and allowed for decision making about grant activities at the county level.

About the Evaluation

In fall 2022, AIR conducted an evaluation of the Network Hubs initiative. The study explored the Network Hubs’ goals and strategies, including the development of and strengthening of partnerships through the Hubs and plans for sustainability. For the evaluation, AIR conducted interviews with the Network Hub leads and administered a brief survey to this group. This data collection took place

EVALUATION APPROACH

Research Questions

1. **Goals and Strategies.** What are the goals and major strategies of the Network Hubs? To what extent do these vary across the 10 Network Hubs?
2. **System-Level Efforts.** To what extent, and how, have the Network Hubs engaged in system-level efforts, including the development of sustainable networks among relevant agencies, to promote early literacy within their respective regions?
3. **Improving Equitable Access.** To what extent, and how, have the Network Hubs improved equitable access to early literacy services and support?
4. **Sustainability.** How do the Network Hubs plan to sustain their work after their grant ends?

Data Collection

AIR conducted interviews in September and October 2022 with all 10 Network Hub leads to explore their goals and strategies, system change efforts, facilitators and barriers to the work, perceived impacts, and sustainability. AIR also administered a brief online survey of the regional Hub leads in the same time period, to gather data on the extent to which each Hub established a network of partners working together to address early literacy issues. Nine of the 10 Network Hubs responded to the survey.

between October and November 2022. (See the Evaluation Approach box for details of the study's research questions and data collection strategies.)

Findings

In this section, we summarize findings from the evaluation of the Network Hubs initiative. The findings are structured according to the evaluation's four research questions.

The Network Hubs used three key strategies to reach their goals: distribution of books, expansion of Talking is Teaching, and professional development.

The 10 Hubs shared common goals, including increasing access to literacy resources, strengthening the capacity of service providers to support children's literacy; engaging families; supporting a network of organizations working together to improve literacy; and, in the long-term, promoting positive early literacy outcomes, such as third-grade reading scores.

Activities across the 10 Network Hubs fell into three broad categories: (a) distribution of books and literacy kits to families and childcare providers, (b) implementation of the Talking is Teaching Campaign, and (c) facilitating access to professional development. Hub leads engaged in networking and planning to support these activities as well as other efforts. However, according to the Hub leads, the majority of each Hub's work focused on direct services related to early literacy rather than system-level change activities.

Distribution of Books and Other Literacy Supports

Nine of the 10 Network Hubs disseminated books to families, as well as literacy kits (e.g., totes filled with books and other literacy resources such as informational brochures). Dissemination occurred at community events or through partners, such as libraries and park departments. Hub leads reported that they focused book distribution to families with limited access to literacy materials or services, including immigrant families with dual language learner (DLL) children (a few Hubs provided books in languages other than English) and in areas of high poverty.

In addition to distributing literary resources to families, six of the 10 Network Hubs also provided literacy resources to childcare providers. (Two Hubs indicated they did not do so, and two Hubs did not comment on this area.) For example, representatives from two Network Hubs prioritized home-based childcare programs, including those that do not participate in Great Start to Quality, Michigan's quality rating and improvement system. One Hub lead described how childcare providers can sign up to receive a book for their childcare program, additional copies of the book for each family whom they serve, and an accompanying learning guide with tips on interactive reading strategies to engage young children in building literacy skills. A Network Hub lead explained as follows:

Just seeing how grateful [the providers] were and how much it meant to them. We want to get this [literacy resource] out to everyone in our community, and they want it . . . Getting that feedback is a great testament to how these funds are being used in this grant. We're making an impact. Even if it's small, it's still an impact and will make a difference for young children in terms of literacy and relationships with their providers and their parents.

—Hub Lead

Talking is Teaching

Seven Network Hubs initiated or expanded Talking is Teaching; representatives from four of the seven Hubs described Talking is Teaching as the major activity supported by the grant. Talking is Teaching is a public awareness and action campaign designed to share information with families about the critical role they play in their child's early brain and language development. In the Talking is Teaching model, "trusted messengers" participate in training to learn how to share messages with parents about young children's development, including early literacy. Hub leads reported using the campaign to build the capacity of childcare providers to promote early literacy among the children they serve and support parents in their role as their child's most important teacher. According to the Hub leads, one of the reasons they decided to use Hub funds to expand Talking is Teaching was because it was low cost, building on work already done by partners in at least some areas of their Hub's region. In addition, leads said this campaign work could likely be sustained after the grant ended.

We partnered with each of the Great Start Collaborative regions because many of them already are working in that field. We boosted and enhanced their ability to launch their [*Talking is Teaching*] campaigns and encourage the last few who were not part of the Michigan network to look into it.

—Hub Lead

Professional Development

Other Network Hub activities varied and included professional development for Network Hub partners and childcare providers, the most common being [Literacy Essentials](#) training (reported by seven Hubs).² Hub leads described facilitating access to training; sharing information about the training; and, in some cases, supporting staff travel and accommodations to professional development.

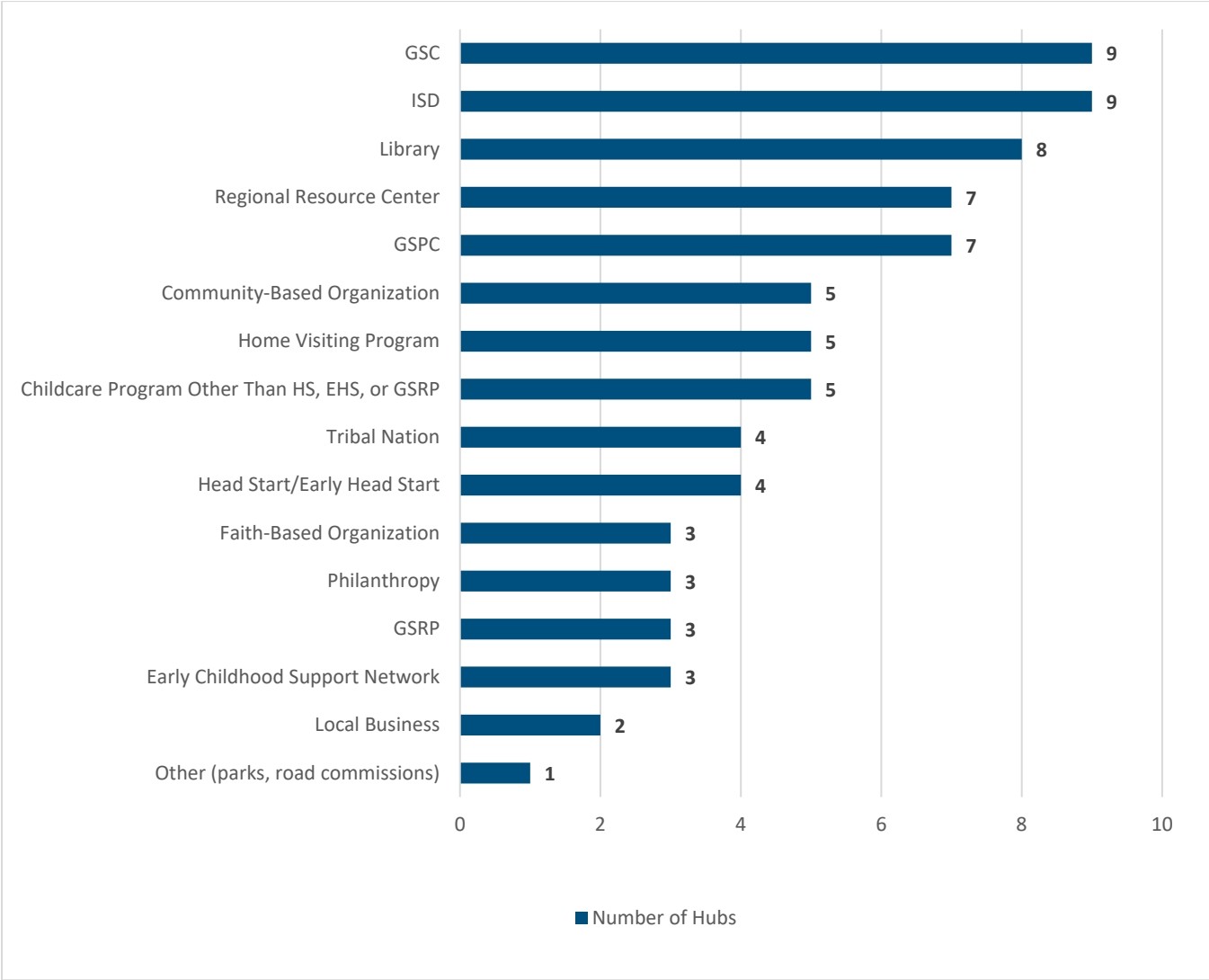
To strengthen local systems in support of equitable access to early literacy supports, the Network Hubs focused on developing partnerships with community organizations.

The purpose of the Network Hubs initiative is to promote coordination and collaboration among local partners to help strengthen an equitable early literacy system. To understand the scope of these networks, Hub leads identified the type of organizations they partnered with, including groups funded

² This training is part of MDE's Literacy Initiative, which provides resources and professional development for teachers, from prekindergarten to Grade 12, to help promote children's literacy in the state.

by the Hub and those not funded. As shown in Exhibit 1, survey data showed that the Network Hubs engaged in partnership with a range of agencies. The primary partners within the Hub networks are ISDs and GSCs; all of the ISD-led Hubs collaborate with the GSCs and vice versa. In addition, almost all Hubs collaborate with libraries, Regional Resource Centers, and GSPCs. About half of the responding Hubs work with community-based organizations, home visiting programs, tribal nations, childcare providers, and Head Start programs. Less common partners (engaged by about a third of the responding Hubs) include faith-based organizations, foundations, the Great Start Readiness Program, and the Early Childhood Support Network. Two Network Hubs reported that they work with local businesses. Across the 10 Network Hubs, the number of types of partners engaged with Hub efforts ranged from one to 15 (data not shown in exhibit), with the average being eight.

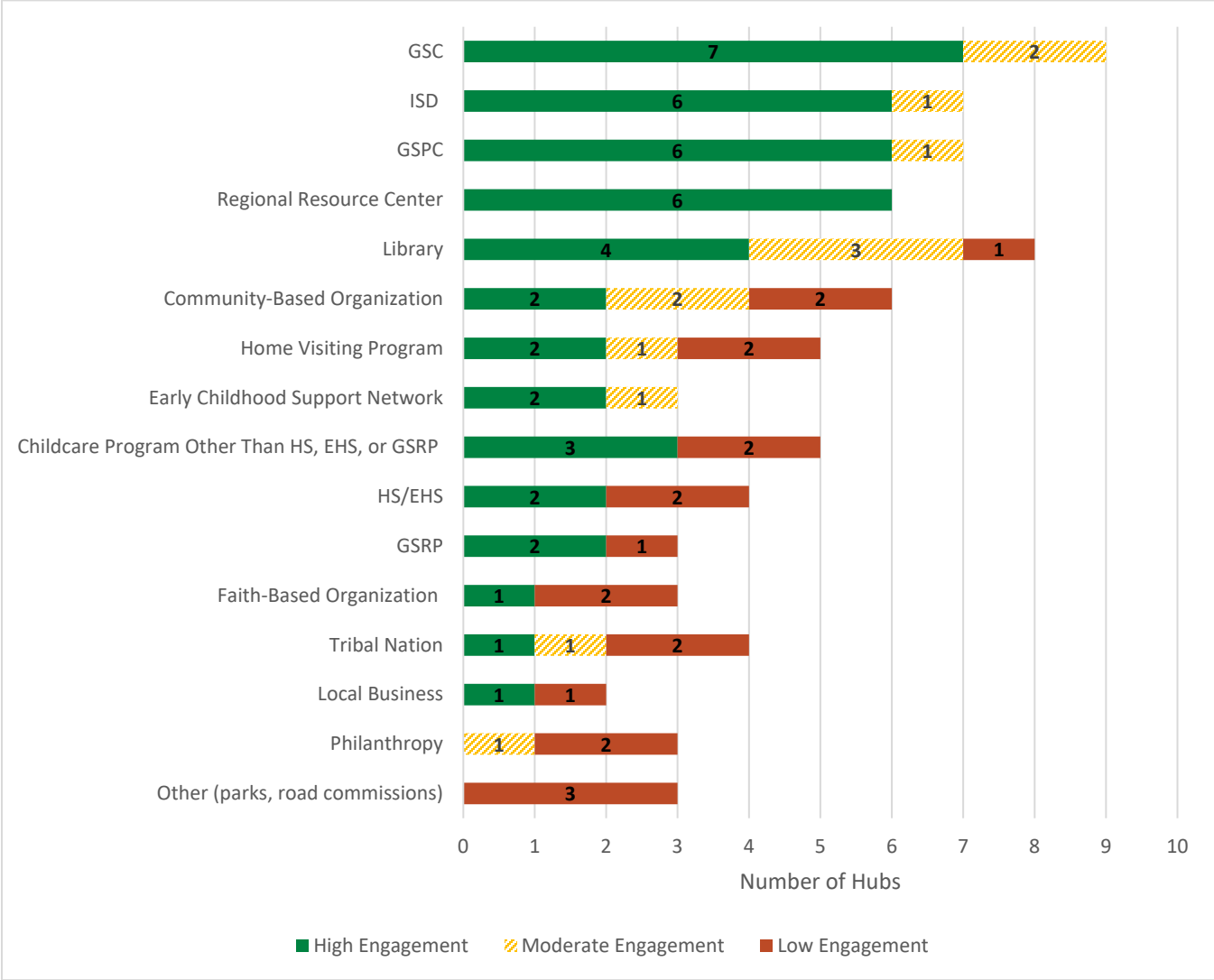
Exhibit 1. The most common types of Network Hub partners are GSCs, ISDs, and libraries.



Note. EHS = Early Head Start; GSC = Great Start Collaborative; GSRP = Great Start Readiness Program; HS = Head Start; ISD = intermediate school district.

In addition, Network Hub leads rated the level of engagement of each partner type in their network (see Exhibit 2): high (shaded green), moderate (shaded orange), or low (shaded red). GSCs engaged moderately or highly in the nine Network Hubs that participated in the survey. The level of engagement of Regional Resource Centers, GSPCs, and ISDs also had a high rating. Libraries, community-based organizations, and tribes were active partners, although their level of engagement varied across the nine Network Hubs participating in the survey.

Exhibit 2. The level of engagement in Network Hubs was highest among GSCs, ISDs, GSPCs, and Regional Resource Centers.



Note. EHS = Early Head Start; GSC = Great Start Collaborative; GSPC = Great Start parent Coalition; GSRP = Great Start Readiness Program; HS = Head Start; ISD = intermediate school district.

Network Hub leads reflected on the work of their network partners. Survey data (Exhibit 3) showed that six Hub leads (66%) agreed or strongly agreed that the grant helped create a strong network of

organizations to address literacy issues; three Hub leads disagreed with this statement. In addition, most Network Hub leads reported that their partners were aware of one another, had shared goals, and were likely to improve outcomes for children and families.

Exhibit 3. Most Network Hubs agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative has promoted partnerships and collective efforts to promote equitable access to early literacy (n = 9).

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The Literacy Support Network Hubs Grant has helped to create a strong network of organizations that work together to address early literacy issues in my region.	33% (3)	33% (3)	33% (3)	—
Organizations that are funded by my region’s hub grant know they are part of a larger network of organizations focused on early literacy in the region.	33% (3)	56% (5)	11% (1)	—
Our hub has developed a set of shared goals in our work plan that each partner is working towards.	33% (3)	44% (4)	11% (1)	11% (1)
Our hub has identified strategies in our work plan that are likely to improve outcomes for children and families in our community.	33% (3)	56% (5)	—	11% (1)

Network Hub leads indicated that they have made progress in improving equitable access to early literacy supports in their respective regions but emphasized it was too early to determine the impact of their work.

All Hub leads reported that the grants helped improve equitable access to early literacy services and supports in their respective regions, particularly in regard to book distribution. Hub leads reported prioritizing children living in poverty, children living in rural areas, children with limited access to early care and learning programs, and DLL children. For example, in Hubs that spanned vast, predominantly rural areas, Hub leads prioritized distributing books and information to families through a diverse range of partners and the use of “mobile literacy kiosks.” One Hub lead explained that it has been effective to “reach families where they’re at,” such as at food pantries; Goodwill stores; Women, Infants, and Children program offices; and libraries.

At the same time, Hub leads emphasized that it was difficult to gauge the impact of their work at this stage of the initiative. For example, one Hub lead pointed to the need for kindergarten entry data, as well as third-grade reading assessment scores, to measure if and how child literacy outcomes are shifting. Another Hub lead explained as follows:

I think that the networks really do have a strong potential to be impactful, but if you look at network development, we’re in that zero-to-three year stage of new networks. They’re emerging at this point and then the next three years is the next level up, and it’s not until you

hit about six years that networks are well established. And so if they want this work to continue, the state should consider how they can fund it at some level or embed it into other programming to make it sustainable.

Network Hub Leads identified factors that impacted their work, including the need for more detailed guidance to support implementation.

Reflecting on their progress to date, Hub leads identified various challenges in their work during initial implementation. They emphasized a need for the following:

- **More clarity in regard to state expectations for the grant**, including the extent to which (and how) the Hubs should focus on system-change activities in relation to direct service. Hub leads reported that the monthly Hub meetings, facilitated by the state consultant, and the consultant’s ongoing technical assistance have been useful. In particular, the state consultant helped clarify the system-building goals for the Network Hubs initiative, providing support to Hubs on developing coalitions of organizations working together to make progress toward collective goals. Several Hub leads emphasized that the consultant, who joined the project in spring 2022, would have been most helpful if they had been available from the start of the grant.
- **More guidance from the state on recommended early literacy initiatives and strategies**, including how to align with other strategies (e.g., how to integrate Talking is Teaching with local models). Hub leads described how communities often implement a local model, without considering how it might link (or not) with broader efforts.
- **More funding to support staff time to lead and coordinate Hub activities**. At least three Hub leads described some type of staffing challenge, including the need for more staff to help facilitate the work. For example, one Hub lead said,

I do think that the staffing issues on a local level [have] been a challenge, and we frankly did not consider how much time leading this grant was going to take. So we under budgeted it. So that’s a challenge too. Because we didn’t really know what to expect, we didn’t put in management and implementation.

The Network Hubs planned to leverage existing early literacy efforts to help sustain the work initiated through the grant.

Hub leads discussed if and how the work supported by the Hub grant would be sustainable after the grant ends. Most Hub leads reported that they used the grant to enhance existing literacy activities rather than support new initiatives, such as Talking is Teaching. For example, one Hub lead described using grant funds to expand its Talking is Teaching campaign to more of its GSC regions and planned to continue to do so after the grant ended. In cases where the Hub did invest in new activities, they strategically supported initiatives that would require minimal funds to sustain (e.g., installing a lending library in a GSC Resource Center and purchasing literacy kits for libraries to loan to providers/parents;

installing environmental prompts, such as yard signs with messaging about early literacy, throughout the community).

Without additional funding, some Hub leads reported that formal coordination among Network Hub partners may be limited. Even with grant funding, staff capacity to run and oversee the grant was sometimes a challenge, according to a few Hub leads.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, the Network Hubs used grant funds to distribute books and other literacy materials to families and childcare providers, implement Talking is Teaching campaigns, provide professional development to childcare providers, engage families to support children's early literacy, and other related activities. To support these types of efforts, Network Hubs partnered with a range of other organizations in their respective regions, the most active being ISDs, GSCs, libraries, Regional Resource Centers, and GSPCs. ISDs serve as the lead agency for most of the Hubs, but survey data indicated a strong collaboration between GSCs and ISDs to implement the Hub work.

Most Hub leads reported that the grant helped create a network of organizations to address literacy issues in their respective regions, and Hub-supported activities were likely to improve outcomes for children and families. In their first 18 months of implementation, the Network Hubs focused on reaching typically underserved groups, including children living in poverty, children living in rural areas, and DLL children. Hub leads characterized their work as positive, getting resources and information into the hands of families in deep poverty and across rural areas. In particular, Hub leads emphasized the success of book distribution to families. Although Hub leads generally described their work as successful to date, they noted that it was too early to determine the long-term impacts of their efforts.

In terms of sustainability, Hub leads reported that they have intentionally implemented activities that could be maintained in the long term (because they were low cost or well aligned with existing efforts that could be integrated into ongoing work). However, some Hub leads expressed concern about their capacity to formally facilitate and support a network of agencies working together on early literacy without ongoing state resources.

As the Network Hubs evolve, the state may want to consider the following recommendations:

- **Continue to deliver technical assistance to the Network Hubs, providing detailed expectations from the state for the grant.** Hub leads expressed appreciation for the technical assistance provided by the state consultant, including guidance on how to foster system-level change in their regions. Given that the Network Hubs initiative is relatively new, continued support is critical as the

Hubs determine how to sustain coalitions in support of early literacy, reduce duplication of efforts, and coordinate collective work.

- **Design and implement measures to track progress toward an equitable system of early literacy supports.** Hub leads discussed their efforts to reach typically underserved families, but it was difficult to determine the extent to which early literacy systems are becoming more equitable. The development of concrete and measurable indicators of progress could serve as a valuable collaborative activity for Hub leads.
- **Consider sustained (and increased) funding for the Hubs.** The goal of the Network Hubs initiative is important and far-reaching: the creation of an equitable, statewide system of early literacy supports. Some of the tasks that Hubs engage in include developing and sustaining regional coalitions and leveraging existing local efforts. This level of system change cannot occur without a dedicated lead to guide the overall effort, including helping partners co-create goals, objectives, and strategies; ensuring adequate stakeholder engagement; and monitoring progress. In some cases, Hub leads reported needing more support for staffing to coordinate the work. Initiatives such as the Network Hubs require effective “backbone support” to successfully engage and coordinate the work of multiple partners.

Reference

Michigan Department of Education. (2020). *Michigan’s Top 10 Strategic Education Plan*.

<https://www.michigan.gov/mde/resources/michigan-top-10-strategic-education-plan>