A Year of Resilience and Innovation

2021 ANNUAL REPORT
(School Year 2020-21)
“This year we found joy and fortitude in our collective and individual resilience...pushing through our adversity and life circumstances, supporting one another to meet the needs of those we serve. We leaned into our collective strength, guided by our mission, to ask what we can learn and how we can be better.”

- Heather Jenkins
CEO
A Message from Our CEO, Heather Jenkins

When I joined The Literacy Lab on February 1st, I shared with staff that beginning my tenure at the start of Black History Month, particularly at a time when racial equity is more regularly thought about, talked about and acted upon than ever before in my lifetime, was incredibly powerful and symbolic. I reflected on what it tells my daughters, my former students and our current students, the young professionals I’ve worked with throughout my career; other women of color; and anyone with big dreams. I also shared that this role, and the work that we do, is my life’s work—my passion and commitment run through my personal and professional lives. Over the past several months I’ve had the privilege to hear from staff as they narrated their wishes, hopes and dreams for the future of the organization, and what we need to do better to realize that future. Every moment of every day I am honored and humbled to lead alongside this team and am energized and excited about our bright future as an organization.

Like people and organizations across the country and around the world, we have not been immune from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. When schools in the regions we serve had to go into lockdown, we worked to turn our in-person service model to be delivered virtually. We combined live virtual and asynchronous video instruction to ensure that students and their families would have access to our literacy services while learning remotely. As schools returned to in-person learning this fall, we resumed in-person service and created a series of safety protocols to best ensure the safety of our staff, Tutors, Fellows, students and school partners. We have been quick to adapt, pivot, learn and grow, which is a testament to the strength of our team.

We spent some time as a team this spring reflecting on the impact of the pandemic and our continuing national dialogue on racial equity and justice on our organization, the work and the people. We thought about the learning interruptions faced by our students, housing and employment challenges navigated by families, and the many obstacles faced by our staff, Tutors, Fellows, and partners. We also thought about the resilience that has carried us all forward and our deep gratitude for the opportunity to work virtually last year and engage not only with our students, but also with their families. We reflected on how grateful we are for our dedicated school partners, funding partners and champions, who ensured that our work would continue and grow. We found joy and fortitude in our collective and individual resilience—staff, Tutors and Fellows banding together, pushing through our adversity and life circumstances, supporting one another to meet the needs of those we serve. We leaned into our collective strength, guided by our mission, to ask what we can learn and how we can be better. The incomparable Maya Angelou captures our spirit, “I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.”

As we move through another challenging and rewarding school year, we are also undergoing an array of organizational changes and updates. This year we added 24 new staff members to increase our capacity to serve more students with integrity, excellence, equity and fidelity. This includes our newly minted Stewardship Team, which is our senior most leadership team. This group includes myself, our Chief Financial Officer and Chief Program Officer along with our first Chief Regional Officer and Chief Operating Officer. The Stewardship Team will lead an equitable and inclusive process to develop The Literacy Lab’s first organization-wide strategic plan this spring. We look forward to sharing more about the future of the organization in the months ahead.

Thank you for your continued support, dedication, and commitment to The Literacy Lab’s work. We are deeply grateful!

Yours in partnership,

Heather Jenkins
Our Theory of Change

When young people from all races and economic brackets have equitable access to robust educational and professional development opportunities, they will be more successful as adults and their communities will be more resilient and prosperous.

Impact by the Numbers

3,799
Students Served

288
Tutors and Fellows Placed in Schools

121
School Partners

2,827,279
Tutoring Minutes
Since 2009, The Literacy Lab has provided evidence-based literacy interventions to close to 31,000 students encountering challenges with mastering early literacy skills. By embedding rigorously trained Tutors in pre-K classrooms and elementary schools to tutor children from pre-K through third grade, The Literacy Lab strives to create a full six-year continuum of support for young readers.

The education system in the United States continues to be deeply impacted by a long history of unjust policies that socio-economically disinvest in communities of color. The Literacy Lab’s mission is to address these inequities by providing students who are economically and racially marginalized with individualized reading instruction to improve their literacy skills. For this reason, our theory of change is that when young people from all races and economic brackets have equitable access to robust educational and professional development opportunities, they will be more successful as adults and their communities will be more resilient and prosperous.
Our Programs

The Literacy Lab has two programmatic areas, as follows:

**Leading Men Fellowship**
Established in 2016, The Leading Men Fellowship program prepares young men of color for careers in education, by providing robust skill-building and professional development opportunities over a one-year period. The Fellows receive rigorous training and coaching in early literacy intervention and social-emotional development and work with pre-K students to deliver high-quality learning interventions, setting them on the path to kindergarten readiness and long-term success. Fellows also participate in standardized weekly Professional Learning Groups to build their readiness for college and career success.

**Reading Corps**
The Literacy Lab has been a replication partner of the Minnesota Reading Corps since 2012, and in this program our AmeriCorps Tutors strive to provide as many under-resourced students in pre-K through 3rd grade as can be reached with a strong educational foundation. Using a research-based and evidence-proven learning model, young learners who are encountering challenges are transformed into confident students. The tutoring time and rigor of The Literacy Lab’s approach is the differentiating factor; and on average students experience accelerated growth equivalent to an extra half-year of schooling.

The Literacy Lab thus takes a two-pronged approach to closing the literacy gap by:

- providing research-based high dosage tutoring to children in pre-K through third grade; and
- recruiting, training, and coaching diverse cohorts of future educators as they gain hands-on experience in high-need schools. This approach meets the immediate needs of students and schools by providing individualized literacy tutoring while laying the groundwork for long-term change in the communities served by training the next generation of educators.

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“I’ve watched lots of my students grow, but the one that stands out to me the most is one student who went from struggling with letter names and sounds, and unable to write her own name, to becoming one of my most engaged and excited students when it came to reading and writing!”

- AmeriCorps Tutor
During the 2020-21 school year, our team of 61 AmeriCorps Tutors, 4 Leading Men Fellows, and 4 coaches supported students both in-person and virtually by providing 367,400 minutes of individualized reading instruction. Despite the unique challenges of this unprecedented year, an impressive 49% of the students served were growing at or above their grade level targets, meaning they were closing the literacy gaps which were made worse by the interruption of reading instruction. This year especially, our impact on students was an added value to partner school administrators, reading specialists, and classroom teachers, 96% of whom would recommend The Literacy Lab’s services.

The Central Virginia team is poised to strengthen outcomes for our students and young people of color in the region by expanding the Leading Men Fellowship. This will add capacity to early childhood classrooms while providing opportunities for young men of color to pursue careers in education.

We are thankful for the investment made by the Virginia General Assembly in the Leading Men Fellowship, which has allowed the program to more than double in size and expand to serve both Richmond and Portsmouth Public Schools.

As we begin the 2021-22 school year we are excited to return to in-person tutoring and will be expanding our program by 14 K-3 Tutors and 4 new K-3 school sites. We are also excited to relaunch the Leading Men Fellowship in Baltimore City in the 2021-22 school year with 10 Leading Men Fellows. Thanks to our public funders, the state of Maryland and Baltimore City Public Schools and our private funders, Goldseker, Thalheimer, Wells Fargo, and T. Rowe Price.

“...”

- Rudi Zelman, Regional Director, Baltimore, MD

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**Regional Highlights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baltimore, Maryland</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>830</strong> Students Served</td>
<td><strong>637</strong> Students Served</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>21</strong> School Partners</td>
<td><strong>29</strong> School Partners</td>
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**Baltimore, Maryland**

- Our team of 69 Pre-k and K-3 AmericCorps Tutors delivered over 617,557 minutes of high-quality early literacy interventions and 253,000 tutoring sessions, utilizing a mostly virtual tutoring format.
- Despite the challenges of virtual learning, our students persisted and 47.4% of our students at the K-3 level were above their target growth rate. Our Tutors also delivered our evidence-based model with 95% fidelity.
- A regional Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee of Tutors and coaches curated a list of culturally diverse and representative read-aloud books at the pre-K level, to help ensure our program is more culturally responsive and accessible to the students and communities we serve in Baltimore.
- Our program continues to contribute to a strong pipeline of educators; 60% of our Tutors in Baltimore are taking steps towards a career in education, and many are staying in Baltimore City to continue their work.

**Virginia**

- During the 2020-21 school year, our team of 61 AmeriCorps Tutors, 4 Leading Men Fellows, and 4 coaches supported students both in-person and virtually by providing 367,400 minutes of individualized reading instruction.
- Despite the unique challenges of this unprecedented year, an impressive 49% of the students served were growing at or above their grade level targets, meaning they were closing the literacy gaps which were made worse by the interruption of reading instruction.
- This year especially, our impact on students was an added value to partner school administrators, reading specialists, and classroom teachers, 96% of whom would recommend The Literacy Lab’s services.
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**School Partners**

- 830 in Baltimore, Maryland
- 637 in Virginia

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Our Kansas City Team started a professional development library initiative for AmeriCorps Tutors to expand their knowledge on topics like anti-racism, equity, education, and trauma-informed care. Books for the library were sourced from local and Black-owned bookstores.

Our team of 30 AmeriCorps Tutors rallied together to support each other by delivering meals to those who were unable to go home for the holidays and sewing masks for each other for “good luck,” as they headed back into school buildings in the spring along with their students.

In Kansas City, the virtual environment allowed us to expand our reach outside of the traditional classroom and Tutors were able to engage 195 family members in tutoring sessions, and create over 200 learning resources for students and families. Through this initiative, the team was able to support over 100 additional teachers with classroom activities.

Our educator community in Kansas City grew, and we are proud to be a part of it as 53% of our cohort took their next steps toward working in education.

In the 2021-22 school year, we are excited to grow our community further by expanding into 3 new school sites and adding 15 additional AmeriCorps Tutors. We look forward to applying lessons learned from this year to better serve the students in our community.

Our 86 AmeriCorps Tutors and 17 Leading Men Fellows joined virtual classrooms across the region to ensure that in a year of unrivaled interrupted instruction, students still experienced literacy skill growth.

We bolstered our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion practice in Metro DC by providing 6 DEI capacity-growth sessions for Tutors, with topics like: “Ableism in Education: A Neurodiversity Perspective”; “LGBTQIA+ Identities in Education and School”; and, “Staying on Course: Having a DEI Mindset Beyond Your Service”.

We are proud to have worked with our school partners to develop additional career pathways for our Tutors. Through this initiative with D.C. Public Schools, Friendship Public Charter School, Apple Tree Public Charter School, Relay GSE, KIPP, and Urban Teaching Fellows, 12 Tutors received offers of employment that enabled them to continue their careers in education.

“During a year of learning loss, our literacy services helped ensure students received equitable gains. We’re so proud of the student growth we’ve seen in a virtual year. We’re also excited to see the number of Tutors and Fellows from this year who will now join us in classrooms as paraprofessionals and teachers for SY21-22. Together we are changing the narrative for students by building strong literacy skills for lifetime opportunities.”
- Jax Chaudhry, Regional Director, Metro D.C.
In spite of the challenges posed by COVID, our team of 10 Leading Men Fellows in Milwaukee thrived, helped their students learn, experienced their own development, and helped us grow the Fellowship.

Working with each of our partners, we created individually tailored schedules for every Fellow to maximize their time with students and most effectively integrate them into the classroom.

Fellows recorded 260 interventions for their students and families to watch in class and at home.

Working with one of our Senior Fellows, we piloted the e-PELI in November and all Fellows whose classroom setup allowed, used it to measure student growth and provide more effective instructions and support throughout the virtual school year.

67% of students ages 3 to 5 advanced in the development of important literacy skills from fall to spring.

“I'm so impressed with the dedication and flexibility our Fellows showed last year through the pandemic. Their commitment to serving our Milwaukee Community is inspiring and I look forward to seeing where they go from here.”
Bernard Rahming II, Program Manager, Milwaukee
We are excited to announce the expansion of the program to Atlanta, Georgia in partnership with the Greenlight Fund, and to Metro Phoenix, Arizona with service delivery set to begin in the 2022-23 school year.

This year we introduced the Senior Fellow role, which offers Fellows the opportunity to continue as Leading Men for a second year while taking on additional leadership opportunities to support the new Fellows in the cohort. This initiative is a response to the need to continue providing employment opportunities to Leading Men Alumni who have demonstrated a long-term interest in education-related careers.

In Milwaukee, we partnered with the Childcare Resource and Referral Agency (4C for Children), to provide paraprofessional certification courses for all the Fellows. In Metro DC, 7 Fellow Alumni took paraprofessional certification exams. 5 out of 7 Fellows are currently serving as paraprofessionals. Next school year, Fellows across all regions served by the program will be offered the opportunity to be certified as paraprofessionals.

In the 2021-22 school year, the Fellowship will expand significantly and 60 Fellows will serve in Baltimore, Metro DC, Milwaukee, Richmond, and Portsmouth, Virginia.

31 Leading Men Fellows served 465 students in our Metro DC, Richmond, Virginia and Milwaukee, Wisconsin regions.

79% of the Fellows from the 2020-21 cohort reported that they were planning to continue and build their careers in education.

“It is OUTSTANDING! Having men in an early childhood classroom is such an asset!!!! Many of the young boys we teach don’t have male leaders in their lives. These men are an amazing resource and such a blessing to have in our classrooms!

- Lead Teacher
Measuring Growth and Progress

At The Literacy Lab, data informs our decision-making and is critical to our ability to make a difference in the lives of the young people we serve. Each spring and fall we conduct student benchmarking assessments to measure their growth from the start to the end of the school year. In addition, our Tutors and Fellows, with guidance from their coaches, perform regular assessments with students to help inform the individualized approach we take with each student.

We were able to conduct our national year-end report, despite the challenges we faced with collecting data during an unprecedented year. Tutoring began later in the fall than in a typical year, given the time it took to get virtual and hybrid instruction up and running. This meant that there was less active tutoring time between fall and winter benchmark assessments than in previous years. Also, given the inconsistency of pre-K student attendance due to pandemic-related school closures and the age-related challenges of virtual tutoring, the student assessment data for pre-K represents a sample of the total students served.

While a smaller number of students exceeded their target growth rate this school year than in past years, we are encouraged by and proud of the growth that students showed. We are also extremely proud of our Tutors and Fellows, who persevered during a difficult year and showed a 95% average fidelity to our teaching model.

Data to Enhance Our Effectiveness

The Literacy Lab also collects data to assess our organizational health and operational effectiveness, through annual staff surveys and Tutor and Fellow surveys. We believe it is of critical importance to hear from the people who are doing the work on a regular basis, to assess the impact of our programming on them (our Tutors and Fellows); and to support job satisfaction through building an emotionally safe and equitable working environment (our staff, Tutors and Fellows).

For the reporting period, our annual staff survey delved deeper into questions of racial equity and inclusion in the workplace and in our program implementation. We are using what we learned from the survey to inform strategies to improve the experience of our most important assets — our staff, Tutors, and Fellows!

During the coming year, we will work to continuously improve feedback loops with our staff, Tutors, and Fellows with support from our newly hired Equity, Impact and Anti-Racism Manager. We will also further invest in our Learning and Evaluation capacity to ensure we fully leverage our data for greater impact.
Tutor Profile: Allison Leibrandt, Virginia

Allison Leibrandt is an experienced AmeriCorps Tutor who served as a Literacy Lab Tutor for the first time during the 2020–21 school year. She tutored kindergarten and first-grade students at the An Achievable Dream Academy in Newport News, Virginia.

The beginning of virtual learning was a bit of a challenge for some of the children, particularly when it came to navigating technology. In Allison’s case, some of her students struggled with getting on and off the virtual learning platform if they did not have assistance. Other students, she says, struggled to make a connection with her and with the work.

One particular student was reserved and quiet during their practice sessions. After working with him for about a month, he could only recognize and sound out three letters. Allison was worried about the student’s progress, but then something changed. “The Friday before winter break, the practice clicked and he could recognize more letters and their sounds,” she says. That day the student recognized 9 different letter sounds and had solid knowledge in half of them. Allison was skeptical that the student would retain what he had learned during winter break. “Fast forward to January, and the first day back, he practiced 11 letters and had mastered 7 of them with automaticity,” says Allison. She refers to him as the “miracle student.”

Allison works closely with the children to build confident readers. She says it is important not to overwhelm the children with the whole alphabet, so she starts with 3 letters at a time. In addition, she finds that using socio-emotional learning techniques help build resilience and teaches students to not give up when faced with a challenge. When the students are frustrated about not knowing a letter, she tells them it is okay to make a mistake and that simply trying is more important than perfection. Once the students learn how to put words together by sounding them out, they feel a sense of independence because they can read the “Leave” button on Zoom and log off by themselves or find their own YouTube videos to watch.

The Literacy Lab’s school partners were so pleased with Allison’s dedication to her students and the quality of her service that they asked her to consider moving to Newport News to be able to serve in person in the 2021–22 school year. Allison enjoyed getting to watch her students grow so when the opportunity to relocate to Newport News came along, she accepted and is looking forward to working in person.
Leading Men Fellow Profile:
Tayvon Talbert, Washington, D.C.

Tayvon Talbert served as a Leading Men Fellow and an AmeriCorps Tutor for three years in Washington, D.C. During his time with The Literacy Lab, he worked with pre-K students ages three to four.

Although Tayvon always wanted to work with children, he lost motivation to attend college when his dream of making it to the NBA came to an end. “My grades, confidence and self-esteem started dropping after the knee injury in high school,” says Tayvon. But a few years after graduating, his passion to work with kids was reignited when he learned about the Leading Men Fellowship from his best friend. He began working as a Fellow in July 2018.

In the beginning, Tayvon says he struggled with some of the program materials such as singing songs and practicing interventions with the students. He credits coaches Sheila Williams and Kimberly Parker for helping him in the areas he needed improvement. Tayvon would show up early to work with his coaches before classes started. With their encouragement and his full commitment to the program, he began to see progress reflected in his students’ high test scores. “As the months went on, I kept practicing,” he says, “I saw that the songs help the kids get active and the interventions helped them practice their letter sounds and put words together.”

The Leading Men Fellowship was more than just a job to Tayvon, it became a place where he and the other Fellows built a brotherhood. Their common interest in education, self-improvement and time spent together created a bond between them. He recalls that his first time leaving his hometown, Washington D.C. was with another Fellow and program leaders. They traveled to California for the African American Male Achievement conference as a professional development opportunity. Furthermore, Tayvon is grateful for the lessons he learned about professionalism, being on time and setting high standards for success. “I think that’s where the [manhood] process started,” said Tayvon as he reflected on the advice and mentorship he received as a Fellow. Currently working as a teacher’s aide, he continues to apply the skills he learned from the Leading Men Fellowship.

While working with the children as a Fellow, Tayvon developed confidence, purpose and a strong support team. “The kids really built up my confidence. They built me back to being who I am,” says Tayvon. He finds joy in seeing his students grow and improve on their literacy skills.
Terrell Mann (she/her) joined The Literacy Lab as a coach to Tutors in 2015 when the program launched in Kansas City, Missouri, and she recalls working at the dining room table of Sarah Reape, the program manager. Terrell has over 30 years of experience as an educator in the classroom providing special education to children from birth to 5 years of age, but also as an adjunct professor with local community colleges training countless teachers over the years.

Terrell joined The Literacy Lab because of her passion for early literacy. She was impressed by the focus on phonological awareness, or the focus on what language sounds like, not just what the words mean. In her role as coach, Terrell ensures that tutors are using the interventions correctly and measures the fidelity to the model. She also helps tutors and lead teachers identify when a student needs more individualized help and can be a sounding board for tutors as they learn to engage with young children. When they work with students every day, it can be difficult to see the students’ progress, but Terrell is quick to remind the Tutors that the program works and students do grow.

With the continued virtual learning in the 2020-21 school year, Terrell, like many educators, feared that young students would miss out on the socialization that comes from going to school. She soon learned that these young students were finding their community right in the Zoom classroom, bonding with each other and caring for one another in the virtual space. When school went back to being in-person in March 2021, says Terrell, the Tutors were swarmed by students who were so happy to see one of their special adults in person. For many young students, building the relationship online first actually helped ease their anxiety in coming back to school or entering a new space.

Terrell reminds us that having a regular routine helps students learn and reduces their anxiety, allowing them to focus on the task at hand. She is excited to be back in the classroom this year. Even with the difficult past two years, she knows the students are resilient and that they will be okay. If we can ensure students know they are loved and we nurture their love for learning, there is no doubt they can get back on track, she says. Coaches like Terrell are a vital part of the team to ensure that students succeed and are prepared for the next part of their learning journey.
Principal Mark McCann was one of the first school leaders in Springfield, Massachusetts to invite The Literacy Lab into his school at Lincoln Elementary back in 2018. He recognized that some students were starting behind their peers or had gaps in their learning. Often these were students of color and students from low-income households. To close these gaps, he was ready to invest in programs with a proven track record. The evidence-based model of literacy inventions used by The Literacy Lab was just what he thought his students needed to succeed.

Since then, Principal McCann has seen first-hand the growth students have made. More importantly he witnessed the students recognizing their own growth. When students see themselves grow and improve, it instills a sense of pride and they believe in themselves, he says.

It is not just the literacy interventions that keep Principal McCann inviting The Literacy Lab back; it is also the amazing young people serving as Tutors. They are often more racially diverse than the school staff and they better reflect the students’ identities and experiences. DiOnte Moore, for example, started his career at Lincoln Elementary as a Literacy Lab Tutor and now serves as a 3rd grade paraprofessional. He formed a real bond with the students, including Kaiden, who he still meets up with and has lunch with on a regular basis even though he is not in Kaiden’s class anymore. The Literacy Lab’s Tutors provide socio-emotional support, role models, and so much more for schools.

When colleagues from other schools call Principal McCann to ask about The Literacy Lab, he assures them that it is a worthwhile investment – not only in students like Kaiden, but an investment in future educators like DiOnte. He has seen Tutors start out unsure of their future plans and fall in love with education. He sees the program’s ability to help close the literacy gap, but also how it can help cultivate new educators with more racial and gender diversity, which is something that he recognizes is needed in early education.
The Year Ahead

The first pandemic year we saw an exponential increase in demand for our services by school partners and community stakeholders, including from the families of our students. We know that school lockdowns have disproportionately impacted students in the communities we serve, with significant numbers of Black and Brown students from low-income communities several months behind in their literacy achievement. This makes the kind of tutoring we offer critically important, and we are compelled to respond by expanding our services.

With the leadership of our CEO and Board, we celebrate the wins of the past year and a half as we gather lessons learned and put plans in place to ensure the sustainability of our organization. Our aim is to adapt and expand to reach and serve every student who needs our services now and in the future.

We have identified the following priorities to strengthen the organization in the short-term while paving the way for longer-term strategy and planning:

- We will respond and adapt to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our school partners, funding partners, staff, and all stakeholders in a way that ensures that we continue to fulfill our mission and to meet the growing need for our services.
- We will work to ensure the organization has the human capacity required to support its expansion, programmatically and operationally.
- We will infuse the values of diversity, equity and inclusion in our work at all levels by assessing and updating organizational practices, increasing our knowledge and understanding, encouraging individual and collective action, and strengthening accountability structures.
- We will develop a cohesive strategy to deepen the impact of the Leading Men Fellowship, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the program for our students, Fellows, and school partners.
- We will work to ensure the continued financial sustainability of our organization, as we expand to reach all young people who need our services.

“We have seen tremendous growth in the students’ reading data. At the beginning of the year, we were very concerned with being virtual. The Literacy Lab has given us the ability to provide intensive support to students who were struggling, and we have seen demonstrable growth in confidence.”

- Internal Coach
Thank you to Our Donors

Thank you to our individual, foundation and corporate donors during our 2021 fiscal year! Additionally, thank you to our AmeriCorps and state commission partners in DC, Massachusetts, Maryland, Missouri, and Virginia for their continued support of The Literacy Lab’s Reading Corps programs. The impact we make in our communities is due to your support.

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