

Social Innovation Fund partners with local funders to support kindergarten readiness in Cincinnati



When Orlando started preschool at Cincinnati Union Bethel (CUB), community and family services agency, he barely spoke. A boy like Orlando statistically has a slim chance of finishing high school. He's a preschool-aged, African-American living with four siblings and their single mother, Anitra, in a low-income neighborhood of Cincinnati.

But thanks to his participation in Books in Action, a proven pre-kindergarten literacy initiative launched at Orlando's preschool this year with support from the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, the Strive Partnership and their local funders, and additional funding from the Social Innovation Fund, the odds have improved greatly that he will complete his public school education. Now, the summer before kindergarten, he finishes sentences from books his mother reads aloud – remembering stories word for word from hearing them in school.

According to Dr. Monica Mitchell, an associate professor of pediatrics at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, who has been charged with evaluating the impact of Books in Action, the groundwork for literacy should be laid before kindergarten. By third grade, she says, students should finish "learning to read" and start "reading to learn." Children who cannot read proficiently by then are four times more likely than their peers to drop out of school by age 19, according to a recent national study.¹

At first, Orlando's ability to predict what would happen next in a story surprised Anitra, who did not realize he had read the books in school. She then learned that this kind of repetition and reinforcement is a hallmark of Books in Action. When Orlando's class read a book about pigs living together in a house, teachers used word cards and puppets to enhance the story's relevance. Some math and science lessons tied directly to the story books, too. Once a month, two actors joined the class to perform a Books in Action story and engage the children. For a story about nutrition, the actors dressed as vegetables and simulated how they felt after eating healthy versus unhealthy foods. Parents were invited twice a month to participate in classroom Books in Action exercises.

Orlando's mother appreciates receiving copies of some of the 40 Books in Action storybooks from his classroom rather than walking three miles to the nearest library with five young children.

Poverty historically has proved to be the greatest predictor of a child's academic success, says Dr. Mitchell. According to a report by City University of New York's Hunter College, one in three low-income, African-American third graders unable to read at grade level will fail to graduate high school.²

Without Books in Action, Orlando's odds may have been even worse: According to the most recent Census data, nearly half of the children in Cincinnati live in poverty – the third highest rate in the nation³ – and Orlando's neighborhood is among the poorest.

¹ Donald Hernandez, "Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation," City University of New York's Hunter College, funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012. Available at <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/347386-doublejeopardyreport030812forweb.html>

² Ibid.

For Orlando and students like him, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati and their collaborating funders are leading a community-wide effort to ensure that by 2020 at least 85 percent of Cincinnati's children will be ready for kindergarten. School districts, businesses, local nonprofit agencies, parents and community leaders all are uniting to help improve low-income preschoolers' preparation for kindergarten and beyond. For the academic year ending in June 2012, Orlando's classroom and one other at his preschool – 51 children in total – comprised the first group outside of Cincinnati Public Schools to participate in Books in Action.

Community results are promising: Since 2007, the percentage of Cincinnati kindergartners passing Ohio's kindergarten readiness assessment for literacy has increased from 45 to 57 percent. Evidence indicates that Books in Action in particular has helped make a difference, says Dr. Mitchell. A decade ago, a Cincinnati Public School pilot showed that students in six early education classrooms implementing Books in Action significantly improved kindergarten readiness scores compared with peers in six control classrooms. In the years that followed, Books in Action expanded to public school Head Start classrooms across the city, reaching 646 children in 2010 - 2011.

Now, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, the Strive Partnership and their local funding partners plan to boost that number by 27 percent in 2012 – 2013. By leveraging seed funding from a Social Innovation Fund grant and additional private investment, they will add a third CUB classroom and two additional Head Start-funded public school classrooms, bringing the total to 820.

Results for the first year are encouraging. Orlando and his fellow CUB Books in Action students as a group significantly improved based on a national pre-school test that covers basic concepts such as numbers, letters, colors and shapes. Before Books in Action, the group scored better than only 33.6 percent of their peers across the nation, and by the school year's end had moved up to the 48th percentile.

At this rate, Anitra has high hopes that she will one day applaud joyfully as Orlando, clad in cap and gown, walks across the stage to be awarded a well-deserved high school diploma.

Collaborative Funding Approach Provides Support for Four Greater-Cincinnati Initiatives Focused on Kindergarten Readiness

Books in Action is one of four kindergarten readiness programs in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky to benefit from a public-private partnership between the Social Innovation Fund, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, the Strive Partnership, and more than a dozen local funders committed to improving outcomes for Cincinnati youth. In addition to literacy, the other three initiatives each focus on a complementary aspect of a preschool child's intellectual, emotional and social development:

- **Transitioning to preschool:** Every Child Succeeds operates a home visitation program for first-time mothers of at-risk children under three. The program will expand its transition services to help parents ensure that their child enrolls in a quality child care or early learning program.
- **Fostering social and emotional development:** The Consortium for Resilient Young Children ensures each child's non-academic needs are met by encouraging positive behaviors and improving classroom management via teacher training, parent engagement and mental health referrals.
- **Spotlighting science and math:** The Cincinnati Museum Center, which prepares Head Start teachers to integrate science activities into their curriculum, will expand from Northern Kentucky into Hamilton County, which includes Cincinnati.