

Communities in the driver's seat: Intensive training, deep investment power parent-led literacy programs in Oakland

DECEMBER 2023

By Travis Pillow

Across the country, school systems are struggling to implement effective, research-based literacy instruction and to help students recover from lost learning time during the pandemic. At the same time, school systems sit near pools of untapped talent—community members who have personally experienced the harm of inequitable school systems and now brim with passion for addressing systemic problems in public education. These are parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, many of whom were poorly served by public schools themselves, and are now watching a new generation struggle.

What would it take to draw upon the untapped talent and passion of these community members? How could systems create cadres of committed educators who could help deliver the individualized instruction students and families want, while also advocating for better systems?

The [Oakland REACH's Literacy Liberator Model and Fellowship](#), a partnership with Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and the literacy nonprofit [FluentSeeds](#), provides one answer to these questions. The Literacy Liberator Model identifies and recruits community members who have personally experienced the shortcomings of their local schools, then trains and supports them to deliver effective instruction. The Liberator Model can not only address longstanding human capital challenges in public education, but can also shift the power dynamics and inequities that have thwarted systemic improvement.

One REACH leader, a former OUSD student and now a parent of students in local public schools, framed the challenge and the potential of the solution her organization had begun to build.

“I have never seen what we are attempting to do right now, which is taking people from the neck of the woods, the community, the streets, and actually trying to place them in positions of being the ones, the leaders that are going to change outcomes for our kids.”

The leader added that communities are full of adults who work in schools, both as formal employees and informal helpers. They work as tutors and paraprofessionals, or accompany children to school and wind up helping out, making copies or providing an extra set of eyes on the playground. The distinguishing feature of the Liberator Model lies in the comprehensive training and preparation provided to prospective tutors, geared towards ensuring their long-term success in their roles.

“No one’s asking them, ... ‘Hey, you wanna work here?’ ... And then investing in them professionally to make certain that they’re supported enough to thrive and be successful at the position. No one’s doing all that.”

Drawing on interviews with REACH leaders, seven Literacy Liberator fellows, and other community leaders, as well as observations of fellowship training sessions and literacy tutors at work, this brief aims to document the design of the program and trainees’ experiences, providing a roadmaps for similar efforts in other communities. The fellowship cohort was small (just 16 participants), but it was designed to fill targeted gaps in a broader citywide tutoring initiative. Since then, REACH has trained a larger cohort of 30 fellows.

The fellows’ experiences and the systems created to support them suggest a potential model for community-designed tutoring programs in other areas, programs that could equip community members to play a more active leadership role in school systems.

KEY FEATURES OF REACH'S LITERACY LIBERATOR TRAINING MODEL

- REACH's sought to help fellows not just become effective tutors, but to also become more effective advocates for improved literacy instruction and the needs of students.
- Community recruits brought strength and conviction to literacy tutoring. Their personal struggles with learning to read, or supporting students in their own families, deepened their sense of commitment to students' literacy needs.
- The training included discussions of struggles with literacy instruction in Oakland and nationally, training in the science of reading, and sessions designed to attune fellows to the needs of specific groups, such as bilingual students and those with learning differences. One fellow who had previously been trained as a paraprofessional in OUSD said this was their first exposure to this deep literacy and leadership training.
- REACH provided fellows with \$1,675 in stipends to compensate them for their time, scheduled training during evening hours to accommodate family needs, advocated for tutors to qualify for medical and retirement benefits, and navigated district bureaucracy to increase fellows' chances of placement in a tutoring position by the end of the fellowship.
- Fellows gave the training program high marks and reported feeling much better equipped to support students and navigate jobs in public schools. One participant called the experience “life-changing,” and others echoed that sentiment.
- Beyond the impact on student reading outcomes, the training was designed to help the Liberators themselves, inspiring them to pursue advancements in their own careers, or to remain employed with OUSD.
- REACH training could have a much broader impact if implemented at a larger scale. The model could include more community members who could serve in other roles beyond tutoring.

Diverse recruits, a common mission

Founded in 2016, The Oakland REACH combines district-level parent advocacy work with direct service to families. REACH advocated for an [Opportunity Ticket](#) to ensure that families affected by school closures received priority access to high-performing schools, worked directly with families to help them navigate the process of finding a school for their child, and supported a citywide coalition for improved literacy instruction.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, REACH addressed challenges that students and families were faced during remote learning—they launched a virtual family [learning hub beginning in the summer of 2020](#), which included a Literacy Liberation Center (LLC) that offered evidence-based reading instruction to K-2 students. The LLC relied on early literacy tutors who were recruited from district and charter schools to deliver lessons using SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words), a structured foundational literacy skills program.

That summer, students' average reading growth pace doubled, convincing leaders that community members could make a substantial impact on youth literacy. One leader who helped the summer learning hub described this insight:

“Part of the work of that first summer was really just letting them know that you can do this. You can hold your own classroom. You can work with kids independently. You don’t need a school or credentialed teacher or anyone to validate you or to position you. You can create your own conditions to be successful. And it was just so inspiring to see the way those women stepped up and grew as leaders and advocates for kids and for themselves.”

OUSD has initiated a major push to ensure students receive systematic instruction in phonics and other foundational literacy skills. Delivering these lessons and tailoring them to individual student needs has depended heavily on a workforce of tutors who can deliver differentiated lessons to small groups of students.

Some schools in the district have devised pipelines to staff these tutoring positions—for example, training some after-school program staff members as tutors. In other schools, however, tutoring positions have been chronically understaffed. To help more students gain access to tutors and the differentiated instruction they offer students, The Oakland REACH designed its Literacy Liberator Model and Fellowship. The number of fellows was closely tailored to match the number of vacant tutoring positions in the district.

REACH staff members visited schools, passing out fliers and striking up conversations with parents. Some Liberator fellows who we interviewed learned of the opportunity through this direct contact. Others learned from fliers that were passed along by family members, or from district employees at their school sites. A REACH leader who was involved in this recruitment effort described a typical conversation.

“People are like, ‘What do you mean? You think I could be a tutor? I’m not qualified to be no tutor.’ I said, ‘You might think you’re not qualified, but I’m gonna tell you right now, the whole goal of this, we’re going to pay you, but we’re going to make certain that you are prepared.’”

This outreach produced a diverse profile of recruits. They included:

- A young man who had seen family members struggle with reading comprehension and quit a job as a security guard to pursue a new purpose in life.
- A retired educator who learned about the science of reading and expressed alarm that he had participated in the “misteaching” of young readers and wanted to right those wrongs.
- A stay-at-home mother who assisted neighbors and relatives with school work and decided that she wanted to help more kids.

The common thread that REACH sought in all candidates was “a real desire to change literacy outcomes,” according to one staff member who helped design the fellowship program. According to this staff member, candidates should be “motivated by the idea that [they] want Oakland to be a city of readers, and that [they] feel connected to that vision and mission.”

The goal of the training program was not simply to equip recruits with a basic understanding of how to deliver phonics lessons, but to deepen those connections to that vision and mission.

The fellowship training covered more than instructional tactics

For six weeks in early 2023, Literacy Liberator fellows met on Tuesdays and Thursdays at The Oakland REACH’s offices for two-hour evening training sessions.

They opened each training session reciting a mantra displayed on a PowerPoint slide:

I am a Literacy Liberator

- 1. I am a leader**
- 2. I advocate for my community’s right to read**
- 3. I build powerful partnerships**
- 4. I deliver high-quality literacy instruction**

REACH developed the training in partnership with FluentSeeds, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving literacy practices. The goals, according to REACH leaders who helped develop the training, were to give fellows an in-depth understanding of literacy research and the barriers they would help students overcome, to deepen their connection to their mission and each other, and to help them see themselves as change agents capable of delivering high-quality systematic literacy instruction.

As one leader involved in early design decisions put it, the Liberators needed to be prepared to work as a “Trojan horse” who was willing to “go into the system, and if you notice people harming kids in the community or speaking negatively about kids ... to say something about it. So we weren’t just training people to be tutors, we were training people to be leaders.”

The sessions delved into topics such as the effects of dyslexia on comprehension, how students raised speaking a language other than English in their home uniquely develop proficiency, and Scarborough's Rope (a conceptual model that describes how successful readers make sense of words on a page by braiding together background knowledge, vocabulary, and awareness of the sounds letters make).

For this analysis, we interviewed seven Liberator fellows. They all agreed that the training helped them see reading struggles—whether from their own time in school or through work with children—in a new light. One described the training experience as “life-changing.” She said: “You get to see the other side, how kids are actually learning, what they actually need. Being able to sound out a word is not enough.”

During one session offered by the advocacy group [Decoding Dyslexia CA](#), the fellows attempted to parse a passage from the second chapter of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* with letters changed to simulate the experience of a child with a reading disability. The changed letters, coupled with the author's unconventional turns of phrase—“wolfish creatures”—rendered the passage incomprehensible.

“Maybe you're just not trying,” a trainer said, simulating the assumptions of some educators. “Maybe you're not motivated.”

Those statements struck a chord with one fellow. “That's how they come at you,” she said. “That's when they categorize you.”

Another trainee spoke up, describing a classmate from sixth grade who was picked on for having dyslexia, and who would frequently act up in class as a ploy to get kicked out and avoid the shame of having to read out loud. A debate ensued about how labels can sometimes stigmatize students, but could also be used to advocate for their needs and hold school administrators accountable for meeting them.

The discussion eventually landed on the idea that labels can be helpful—if they rest on a foundation of empathy and understanding.

“When I was a kid, when I heard ‘dyslexia,’ I had no idea what that meant,” one fellow said. The simulation had allowed them to see the world through the eyes of someone with a learning disability for the first time. The fellow added: “This is something you go through every day, and my head is hurting after I did it for five minutes.”

Liberators applied their training on the job

REACH designed the fellowship to go beyond the bare essentials of literacy instruction, in part because instilling leaders with a sense of the broader mission would help prevent them from falling off course. The fellowship was paired with site visits and a four-day intensive residency, focused on equipping future Liberators with the skills necessary to deliver SIPPS lessons effectively in classrooms. Where the fellowship helped to instill a sense of the mission, the residency focused on preparing Liberators to execute that mission in the classroom.

One REACH staff member who helped design the training program said that steeping Liberator fellows in “the why behind the curriculum” would help them deliver lessons with deeper conviction and resist the temptation to elide important components.

This staff member said, “If I give you something that you’re not necessarily a hundred percent bought into and you’re told, ‘okay, I have to say all these things in this way,’ you’re not gonna deliver it in the same way. Kids are not gonna get it in the same way, or you might deviate from it.”

The Liberators needed to be equipped with a clear vision of their role and prepared to push back on assignments, like covering lunch duty, that might detract from their mission, and to attune themselves to the needs of children whose reading progress may have been held back by a lack of disability or language accommodations.

After spending more than a month delivering the SIPPS lessons, one Liberator fellow reflected on the value of her fellowship training. “It was a lot of good information,” she said. “A little bit overwhelming, but it was needed. I didn’t know how much it was needed until I actually got into the process.”

For example, the value of an in-depth session on dual language learners became clear when some of her Spanish-speaking students went through a period when they were largely nonverbal. The training showed this was a normal stage of development for these students, and offered advice on how to support them.

Another Liberator fellow contrasted the depth and breadth of the training she received through the fellowship with her scant preparation for working as a paraprofessional at an Oakland Unified school. “There were no classes, there was nothing” to prepare for the earlier paraprofessional role, she said. “I did training as far as the basics of admin and HR type stuff. There was nothing other than what I already knew.”

As part of our interview protocol, we asked each fellow if they felt they had developed a sense of themselves as an educator. The responses varied, but they largely agreed that the training had pushed them further along their professional paths, not just in their journey to become educators, but in their ability to make an impact on larger issues affecting Oakland students. Said one fellow:

“What I do feel is capable of making the change.”

The support system for Liberator fellows was critical

REACH and their partners designed the training to be accessible to community members who were juggling other work and family obligations. They held training during evening hours to accommodate as many work schedules as possible, provided free child care during the training, served meals to fellows and their children, paid fellows a stipend to compensate them for their time, and offered a shuttle service through a local hotel to those who did not have access to public transit. In interviews, multiple fellows said these features were critical to their ability to complete the training. Once training was complete, fellows had to apply for jobs at district-operated schools.

One leader who helped design the fellowship program noted that for many people, “the onboarding and application process through the district can become a barrier.” This could be doubly true for fellows who were navigating the application process

while working other jobs—many worked third shift or had either inflexible or unpredictable hours.

As a result, REACH worked with fellows through every phase of the hiring process. Of the 16 trainees in the initial fellowship cohort, 11 participants completed onboarding for tutoring positions in OUSD schools, and one additional fellow took on an academic mentor role that also involved delivering structured literacy lessons.

In other words, REACH designed its support system to remove the obstacles that frequently cause Black, Latinx, and working-class job candidates to fall out of the pipeline to traditional education jobs. As one leader put it: “You remove things that people see as potential barriers ... to where they can see their way on the other side.”

Given their history of strong advocacy, REACH was also able to secure changes to OUSD’s early literacy tutors job descriptions to make them eligible for employment benefits. Leaders also described raising the wages for those positions, which would make the jobs more compatible with Oakland’s high cost of living.

Fellows applied training insights to their own lives

The training frequently prompted lightbulb moments where fellows saw reading struggles in their families and communities in a new light. Three of the seven fellows we interviewed described instances where they applied skills from their training to scrutinize the reading assignments that children in their families or communities brought home, and how they helped these students when they weren’t receiving the assistance they needed in school.

One fellow described helping his niece who was struggling with her reading homework. He noticed that the assignment was asking her to guess the words on the page based on their first letter and other clues, such as pictures. He recalled this discredited method, known as three-cueing, from his training, and that the practice was described as harmful. “I really was shocked because these kids, they’re sponges, so they’re able to easily pick up on these things if you give them the right instruction,” he said. “But the fact that [a proven method of reading instruction] wasn’t there just kind of baffled me.”

Another fellow described how she learned how to help children recognize the sounds of different letter combinations in her training, and immediately began applying the concept with her seven-year-old daughter. “Before coming to this fellowship, she was mixing up her letters and would shy away from reading,” she said. “Now I’m teaching her in a different way, and it’s actually working perfectly.”

These experiences suggest an intriguing possibility. What would it look like to train a larger unit of parents, aunts, and uncles not just as tutors, but as literacy advocates who could spot flawed practices, advocate for effective instruction, and support students and families in their communities? Similar forms of deep training aimed at a much broader audience could achieve a farther-reaching impact.

The dyslexia training described earlier in this brief prompted a similar discussion among some of the fellows. They wondered why every educator—or for that matter, every student—did not have the chance to participate in a similar dyslexia simulation.

Both students and teachers could benefit from increased empathy for people with learning disabilities, and educators could gain insight into more effective support strategies.

New investments needed to place communities in the driver's seat

As REACH discovered through its virtual summer hub, tutors bring unique assets to literacy instruction. They live and work in Oakland, and many have children that attend local schools (or they attended local schools themselves). They may relate to their students better than traditionally credentialed teachers who do not share those experiences. As one REACH leader put it: "These are really amazing community members with incredible gifts that, given the right opportunity, will thrive and shine and help change literacy outcomes in Oakland."

Traditional credentialing systems have pushed these community members to the margins, to the detriment of schools and the students they serve. A REACH leader and lifelong Oakland resident described the challenge in stark terms:

"This problem has been happening [since] when I was a child. Same schools that were piss-poor and failing when I was in the second and third grade are the same ones that are piss-poor and failing now. They're the same ones nobody wants to send their kids to, but they're sending their kids to them based out of desperation or [because] that's the neighborhood school. And that's where I'm at. And that's all I got. I don't have any other options. But this Liberator Model is gonna change the game. It is about taking the community itself and putting them in the driver's seat to make certain that there is academic success."

One Oakland education leader said that the Liberator initiative will require a fundamental belief in the often-overlooked strengths that community members bring to the table, as well as a willingness to help them overcome historic and systemic barriers to becoming educators.

"If we're hiring community members who have experienced generational trauma, they bring immense assets and skills to the work and effectiveness to the work, and they bring the results of having experienced generational trauma. So, the type of investment we need in their mental health and their leadership development and all the things is real."

School systems have historically struggled to make these investments, but the experiences of the Liberators point to the potential payoff.

Notes and forthcoming research

This brief is part of a larger study investigating REACH's role in a city-wide tutoring initiative in Oakland. Due to difficulties with following up with Liberator fellows,

we were only able to interview one member of the fellowship cohort after their placement in an OUSD school.

The Oakland REACH continued following up with the Literacy Liberators. Of the initial 16 fellows placed in schools during the spring of 2023, five remained in similar roles in the fall of 2023. Of REACH's second cohort of 30 Liberator fellows, 20 were working in OUSD positions at the time of publication.

Forthcoming research will investigate the Liberator's experiences tutoring and working in schools, their impact on student learning, and how training from REACH affected their outcomes.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at [Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College](#). We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

The author would like to thank the staff of The Oakland REACH and Decoding Dyslexia CA for opening their training to an outside observer. He would also like to thank Heather Casimere for her assistance in conducting interviews.

CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

ASU Mary Lou Fulton
Teachers College
Arizona State University

crpe.org