



Jennifer L. Nelson
 (jennifer@jennifernelson.com) is a freelance magazine writer specializing in parenting and education.

STEPS TO **ADVANCE LITERACY**

How ILA and Reach Out and Read are working together to make a literacy impact in Boston and beyond

By **Jennifer L. Nelson**

*W*hen it comes to building literacy skills and inspiring a new generation of passionate readers, forging strong partnerships is among the best ways to educate families about the value of reading aloud to their kids.

The International Literacy Association acknowledges this, so its conference this July in Boston will involve teaming up with local nonprofit Reach Out and Read to host the first-ever Steps to Advance Literacy 5K on Sunday, July 10.

Exhibitors at the conference will donate hundreds of books for all age levels to Reach Out and Read, and runners and walkers are encouraged to donate new or gently used books on race day.

Reach Out and Read aims to provide young children with a foundation for success by incorporating books into pediatric care visits and encouraging families to read together. With the help of a national network of medical providers, the organization works to incorporate books and advice on reading aloud into every visit starting at infancy. Parents receive tips and kids go home with age-appropriate books, toys, and other tools to help promote literacy development.

“We start early to educate parents about their role in building their child’s literacy skills, but we also hope to help them build that social and emotional connection. We want all children to associate reading with sitting in the lap of a loved one and enjoying that special time together,” says Brian Gallagher, executive director of Reach Out and Read. “We’re so grateful that ILA is sharing their passion for promoting reading together as a family to help us encourage parents to have these experiences before their kids even start school.”

“An essential component”

What started 26 years ago at Boston City Hospital (now Boston Medical Center) has transformed into a national initiative. Reach Out and Read now serves nearly 4.5 million children, who represent nearly one quarter of those living in low-income households in the United States today. Studies are showing that children served by Reach Out and Read during their preschool years score three to six months ahead of their non–Reach Out and Read peers on vocabulary tests.

“We often say it starts with one book, one child, and one parent at a time, and by teaming up with ILA and focusing on connecting with our families, we’re able to reach so many parents and demonstrate the potential they have to build a strong foundation in literacy for their kids,” Gallagher says.

Health care professionals are learning that providing parents with tips on reading aloud can be just as important as addressing their child’s health needs. In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared literacy promotion an essential component

of pediatric care for all children, and referenced Reach Out and Read’s work.

“The concept is that pediatric check-ups are something parents know they have to do, and the doctor has a level of authority that a teacher may not—so we know they’re more likely to listen,” explains Lesley Morrow, member and past president of ILA, volunteer for Reach Out and Read, and professor and director of the Center for Literacy Development at Rutgers University in New Jersey. “While the child is being examined, the physician will not only talk about nutrition and vaccinations, but also discuss literacy and ask important questions about what and how the parents are reading to their child.”

“Very much about empowerment”

One of Reach Out and Read’s researchers is Dr. Alan L. Mendelsohn, associate professor of pediatrics and population health and director of clinical research for general and developmental-behavioral pediatrics at New York University School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital Center. He studies poverty and school readiness, and pediatric primary care as an underutilized opportunity to reach low-income families. Morrow and Mendelsohn have both worked and published together for Reach Out and Read.

“The idea is to make every check-up a literacy-rich opportunity in which reading aloud can be modeled while the child is waiting to be seen,” he says, “and then the doctor provides a developmentally appropriate children’s book in the family’s preferred language and guidance on the best ways to use it at home.”

Researchers are also helping the program expand into using other mediums. In one of the latest initiatives, the Video Interaction Project, parents meet with an interventionist who provides an additional book or toy, records the parent and child reading or playing together, then watches the video with the parent to reinforce strengths in the interaction and further support the development of crucial literacy skills.

“Our program is very much about empowerment. We want to help parents

view themselves as playing a critical role in their child’s development and school readiness,” Mendelsohn asserts. “Our research shows that adding this approach to Reach Out and Read will return even greater impacts on the child’s cognitive and language development as well as their emotional development...and all while helping children learn to pay attention and control their behavior—which will be critical for when they start school.”

“Set kids up for success”

Today, Reach Out and Read partners with more than 5,500 program sites and distributes 6.5 million books per year.

“We know school readiness is critical to long-term health, and our mission is intimately tied with that of ILA in that our ultimate goal is to help set kids up for success and promote optimal development in school and beyond,” says Dr. Manuel Jimenez, also a Reach Out and Read researcher who has published with Morrow. He is an assistant professor in the departments of pediatrics and family medicine and community health, and director of developmental and behavioral pediatrics education at The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Jersey.

That’s why Reach Out and Read encourages communication and collaboration between not only parents and pediatricians but also educators.

“That’s really the most important way ILA members and all educators can get involved—communicate,” Jimenez says. “We’ve done a lot of work to encourage pediatricians to connect with educators when they identify any literacy concerns; that two-way communication about a child’s literacy development can truly make a lifelong impact.” ■

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The **Steps to Advance Literacy 5K** will be held at 7:30 a.m. on Sunday, July 10, in Boston Commons. For more information, visit ilaconference.org/5K.