



**NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES**  
**Institute for Youth, Education, and Families**

*It Takes a Village: Using Mayor's Book Clubs to Promote Early Literacy*  
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National League of Cities (NLC)

*Speakers:*  
**Joan Foster**, mayor, City of Lynchburg, Va.  
**Linda Lanier**, CEO, Jacksonville Children's Commission, Jacksonville, Fla.  
**Emily Kirkpatrick**, vice president, National Center for Family Literacy  
**Laura Westerg**, director of special projects, National Center for Family Literacy

*JOHNSON:* Good afternoon. This is Cliff Johnson. I am the executive director of the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) at the National League of Cities. I am delighted to have you join us this afternoon for our monthly audioconference. This audioconference is on the subject of mayors' book clubs, so our title is "It Takes a Village: Using Mayor's Book Clubs to Promote Early Literacy." This is one of the exciting new pieces of our work here at the Institute as we learn more about the roles that city leaders can play to make a difference in school readiness and early literacy. So we are delighted to be able to share some of that excitement and innovation with you for the next hour this afternoon.

I think that many of you on the line, no doubt, have a sense of the critical importance of the first five years of life for young children. So much early learning that becomes the foundation for future growth and development happens during the first few months and years of a child's life. We know a great deal – as we will talk about in a few minutes – about the importance of the early learning opportunities for young children and the significance that has in terms of their readiness to learn and succeed in school, and also their ability over time to be at grade level or above grade level and achieve and excel in a way that we would hope all children will. So we hope that at the end of this hour you will leave with a bunch of new ideas of things that you can do whether you are in a large city or a smaller community, and with a sense of some of the excitement that we have about the possibilities for municipal leadership in this area.

So let me first introduce to you very briefly the folks that we have on the line. First we have Mayor Joan Foster from the city of Lynchburg, Va. Good afternoon Mayor Foster.

*FOSTER:* Good afternoon to you and everyone else.

*JOHNSON:* Lynchburg has been doing some great stuff in this area, so we are excited to have you learn about it. Mayor Foster is also the chief operating officer of, and let me get this right Mayor Foster, is it the Alliance for Families and Children?

*FOSTER:* That is exactly correct.

*JOHNSON:* Great. She has a long history of work in this area, so she brings a wealth of knowledge to what we are doing here and what we are talking about. Second, we have Linda Lanier with us who is the chief executive officer for the Jacksonville Children's Commission in Jacksonville, Fla. Welcome Linda.

*LANIER:* Thank you. Hi Cliff. Hi everybody.

*JOHNSON:* It is great to have you here. Linda has been with the Children's Commission since August 2003. Have you been the C.E.O. the entire time Linda?

*LANIER:* Yes I have.

*JOHNSON:* Wonderful. You will hear a little bit more about the Children's Commission in Jacksonville – which is a strong partner for the city and also receives some of its support from the City of Jacksonville – and about their exciting work with the Mayor's Book Club and other initiatives there in Jacksonville. And then we have two colleagues with us from the National Center for Family Literacy. First we have Emily Kirkpatrick who is senior director at the Center. Welcome Emily.

*KIRKPATRICK:* Thank you Cliff.

*JOHNSON:* It is great to have you here. You are actually now vice president, right?

*KIRKPATRICK:* You heard a good rumor.

*JOHNSON:* That is a good rumor. That is a relatively new development I gather, so congratulations on that. And Emily has a long history of work both on the political side of things and work with the Secretary of Education in Ken., and a lot of other knowledge and experience to bring to this. Also from the National Center for Family Literacy we have Laura Westerg, who is the director of special projects and research at the center. Welcome Laura.

*WESTERG:* Thank you Cliff and greetings to everyone.

*JOHNSON:* And then finally, accompanying Mayor Foster from Lynchburg today, we have Lori Vesinger. Am I getting that right Lori?

*VESINGER:* Yes. Thank you Cliff.

*JOHNSON:* Wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us. Lori has a different perspective and will bring some more insights into the work that is going on there in Lynchburg. Let me turn first to Emily and Laura and to ask you to frame this out for us a little bit in terms of the importance of early literacy for children and how you folks at the National Center think about the return on investment for putting energy and resources into early literacy efforts. Emily, do you want to start us off?

*KIRKPATRICK:* Well at the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), we know that literacy is very important and vital to all of our communities and certainly to the nation and that extends across the lifespan. NCFL has been working on some very exciting and recent research developments, which I will hand over to Laura to talk about, that relate specifically to the education and literacy needs and attributes of young children. Laura, would you like to talk about those recent developments?

*WESTERG:* Sure. We have been working with the National Early Literacy panel for a number of years synthesizing the research on early literacy development in young children and we are finding out the early literacy predictors for later reading success and also looking at the interventions or programs that occur with young children that also build those early literacy skills and also reading outcomes as well.

*JOHNSON:* So where do you see – how do you folks think about the payoff of focus on early literacy? In general terms, as well as anything specific you might offer there.

*KIRKPATRICK:* Well obviously the success of young children. We see that there is great payoff for them both academically and socially later in life. We see more children who are involved in programs when they are preschoolers actually graduate from high school, going on to post-secondary education. There are a lot of social benefits also to early literacy that we have seen for children such as financial gains and purchasing homes. Also for children who have been at risk at that young age, you know, staying out of prison, decreases in crime for that population, so there are really a number of both academic kinds of outcomes as well as social outcomes.

*JOHNSON:* And we see lots of connections here in the research right?

*KIRKPATRICK:* Absolutely. The research bares this impact out.

*JOHNSON:* And so we know a lot now about how young children's exposure to words and vocabulary and whatever influences their learning as they move towards the school-age years, right? And we also know that it is terribly important to sort of master this reading challenge to have those literacy skills by third grade. The research shows that it makes a big difference whether you are reading at grade level by third grade, and if you are not, it is a real predictor of future struggles in the school years.

Mayor Foster, let me turn to you for a second. You have obviously been leading the city of Lynchburg's efforts and working in partnership with the library to focus on early literacy. What caused you to focus time and energy in this area? Why are you supporting early literacy in

the ways that you are, and how do you think about early literacy being connected to other city priorities?

*FOSTER:* Well, thank you for that question because I have found as a former educator – and as I stated earlier – that reading is a great indicator of success in life. Being able to read and write with the readiness skills that early reading can provide. So knowing that and now in not only the political position but also in my everyday job I do at the Alliance, we are tied in with an initiative that our Governor in Virginia has been a forerunner of for children, that they are ready to start when they go to school. Knowing all of that, and knowing that there is no mayor’s book club in the state of Virginia that I am aware of, I thought it would be kind of nice to start. And to kick start that I thought definitely that this would tie in with our Governor, and the predictors, and what that would do for the community. I mean, you just go to a businessman or you can go to a parent, or you can go to anyone in this community and say it is a priceless investment because they are going to be ready for school. That means they will be ready for success in school. It also means they will be ready for the work world. A businessman, they know now, and we are trying to tell them that what is learned before you enter school and in those early years is extremely important to a worker.

*JOHNSON:* Linda, in Jacksonville, I know that the Children’s Commission has been sponsoring and supporting Mayor Peyton’s Book Club as well as RALLY Jacksonville! and the Mayor’s Literacy Initiative, and so obviously you have a big head of steam here around the early literacy work. Do the comments that Mayor Foster just offered resonate in terms of the conversations that have really been going on for more than a decade in Jacksonville about the importance of this? Do they sound similar, and how does that look there in Jacksonville in terms of why city leaders and the commission have been so focused in this area?

*LANIER:* You know that work, you are right. That work has been going on for ten more years in Jacksonville but I have to say that until this mayor came into office and he used his bully pulpit to talk about it and talk about why it is important, it really did not have the kind of profile and, as you called it, the head of steam that it has right now. This really came about – and I am going to say good things about our mayor right now – it came about because when he was campaigning for office – and he is a young man, when he was campaigning he was in his thirties – he was asking people, “What would you like me to do if I become mayor?” Overwhelmingly they said to him, “We want you to fix education. Our educational system is just broken.”

Well the mayor in Jacksonville can’t fix the educational system because it is a different state system. The mayor has no control over the school board or the education system or the schools or anything. However, he caught on to the idea that what we could do as a municipal government, is help get kids ready to go to school, and in doing so that would help to fix the school system. In other words, delivering a better quality student to the school board, to the kindergarten classroom. So that is sort of how it all came about.

Then the other big thing that he did was he put his money where his mouth was. The Jacksonville Children’s Commission is part of the City of Jacksonville. We are an independent commission, but we are funded by the city government and so he allocated an additional \$5 million to be focused just on this work. So between that money and the money we

were already spending and then the money that our partners spent, it is about a \$10 million effort here in Jacksonville and we are beginning the results of that investment.

*JOHNSON:* That is so impressive. I think that we have tried to communicate through the work here at National League of Cities how important this leadership issue is. You know, that many things flow from it including resources and investments, but your description of the role that the mayor has played as a catalyst for these efforts and his use of the bully pulpit and bringing folks together is very helpful. Because in contrast, if I understand correctly Mayor Foster, you have an effort in Lynchburg where the city has not been in a position to directly invest in the Mayor's Book Club effort, so you have found other ways to make that happen right?

*FOSTER:* That's right. You know, I am just, I mean my teeth almost fell out when I heard that Jacksonville...

*JOHNSON:* Isn't that great?

*FOSTER:* That's wonderful and one day I hope that we will be there but right now I wish we could even say we get two cents from the city, but we don't. You know, don't let that discourage you; it didn't me, and I said I will go out and raise some money and that is what I did. We are historically a pretty conservative area and I have to prove that this is what will help our bottom line. This is what will improve the quality of life and improve our workforce. I'm about doing that at the moment, so I am convincing individuals that will give to the effort. So far I barely eek out the money right now to buy the books for the children but I just keep plugging and hopefully it will continue and grow. And what a goal! Maybe I will have \$10 million one day.

*JOHNSON:* The message for me is that if the mayor's commitment and leadership is there, then there are potentially multiple paths or multiple ways forward. So that is awfully important. Let me stay with Mayor Foster and Linda Lanier for just a second and give our listeners a bit more of a flavor for components of the book club. What are we talking about here with the mayor's book clubs? What are the key pieces of what you are doing? Mayor Foster, maybe you will start for us?

*FOSTER:* I was hoping we would start with Linda, but I will tell you mine first because I just wanted to get books in children's hands that were unable to purchase books at all, in homes where there are really no books – and that would be in areas of our inner city and in areas with subsidized housing. I worked with our libraries. Now some library funds were put toward this for technical assistance, I will call it. We have two librarians who go with me. We have outfitted a very colorful van, and money is going towards supplies and basic refreshments, so there is some city money in that regard. Then the actual books we are able to order through the library at a good discount. We are just concentrating on animals right at the moment. We started off with farm animals. We are doing forest animals, and zoo animals; because animals come in all sizes, all shapes and all colors, we do not get involved – that is just a universal language.

So with that, we picked three of the most high need housing developments in the community, and on a Saturday and we spend all day at the development, approximately two hours each. We work very closely together, the librarians and myself, to do a real learning,

hands-on experience from reading one of the books to then being followed by Lori Ambien who will do a hands on course and musical presentation , as well as puppets. So it becomes a very fun time for the children. And then at the very end the kids line up to get their book with a personal message in each book encouraging the child to come back the next time, and we give them the date that we will be in the housing development. Then they get a personal message to please read everyday.

Right now the challenge is for parents to come with the children. They think it is a great time to just drop the children off but we try to catch them at the door and tell them how important it is that they be involved in the reading experience of their child. That is the point we are looking at to grow and we have had some housing developments that have those recreation centers there that are working with us and they have made commitments continuing to promote it and work with us in the future. So that is overall, quick, real summary of what we are doing. I do not want to go on forever, which I could.

*JOHNSON:* That is a great overview. Linda let me turn to you because I know that you have a number of different things in place with Mayor Peyton's Book Club.

*LANIER:* The book club is one part of the overall literacy effort. I so agree with Mayor Foster, we have to pay attention to those neighborhoods where children do not have the kind of environment or opportunities that they really need to thrive and to learn. So the effort that we have focused on is our effort to improve the quality in the childcare centers in those neighborhoods. There is an entire coaching program that moves the centers towards a quality rating system – basically a five star system that I know is present in many other states – and we have just been a part of the work with the Early Learning Coalition to develop that.

That is not really the book club though, that is the other part of the effort. For the book club, we actually wrote our own books – although I do not think that is required – but one member of our staff, Ginger Peacock-Preston, is really talented and she was able to do some writing. We were able to develop 12 books and they are books that are about Jacksonville, so there is the cultural competence in the books; they are for Jacksonville children about Jacksonville. So for example there is a book about Jacksonville's bridges and different places in Jacksonville. There is one about the Timucuan Preserve, which is a historic Indian area. There is one about the beaches, of course, because we are on the Atlantic Ocean. There is one about the river, because we have the fabulous St. John's River. There is one about the museums in town, one about the libraries, one of my favorites is about the city's helpers, who are the people who pick up our garbage and deliver our mail and that kind of thing. The books are about a dozen pages long and they look very, very sweet but I call them hidden weapons because what you don't know when you pick up one of these books is that they are very scientifically designed to match the four-year-old reading standards. Even the amount of white space on the page, the type face, the size of the letters, the drawings, they are all really very scientifically adapted to the little hands of a child and the reading ability and challenge for a child.

So the way it works is that any four-year-old in Jacksonville is able to join the Mayor's Book Club. The reason we did it that way, is we do have a focused effort in our poorer neighborhoods, but we also had to do something that just sort of across the county – we have a county of 800,000 plus people – across the county we really wanted to just get people excited about literacy and getting kids ready to go to school. So we have between 11,000 and 12,000

four-year-olds in any given year in Jacksonville and our penetration is somewhere around 8,500 of those kids would be in the book club.

They get these very sparkly yellow backpacks with their book and they also get some fun things with it. They get, of course, a T-shirt. There is always a T-shirt. They get a little hanger that goes on their door that says “Shhh! I am reading.” They get a bookmark. Their parents get sort of a guide to the book so they know what it is the children are learning and what kinds of things the parents should emphasize when they help the children read the books, like beginning and ending sounds, or rhyming words, or something like that. There are a few other sort of collateral materials in the backpack. I think the one kids really seem to be most fond of is a little blanket. It is sort of a yellow fuzzy blanket with the mayor’s insignia on it. We call it a reading blanket and the idea is that we know the four-year-olds like to cuddle still and so cuddling and reading a book is sort of a double reinforcement for a good pleasurable activity, or it is a blanket where you can make a space of a sofa, on the floor, or outside on the grass and relax and read a while.

So basically that is the thing and we have had pretty steady enrollment. We are heading into our fifth year and this year we are writing one new book and that is a book to help children understand how, as four-year-olds, they can help our city’s effort to go green. So they are learning things like turning the lights off when you leave a room, turning the water off when you brush your teeth, some other things that they can do and get them thinking that way early. So I don’t know, I am not sure who likes it more, the kids or us.

*JOHNSON:* I can hear that. I mean what is great, once you get started down this path there is so much room for creativity, right? So you can have a lot of fun with it. One of the things I love about the mayor’s book club model is that there is both, on the one hand, the focus on the resources – you know, books, reading materials, sort of the things that open the door to early literacy – but there is also the sustained engagement activities that focus on reaching parents as well as children, and having activities that allow individual parents, children, and families to be engaged. It also allows the larger community to find its voice about its values, the importance of early literacy, and to celebrate early reading in ways that really lift it up.

Let me pull our colleagues from the National Center for Family Literacy into this conversation for a few moments and ask about some of the specific challenges facing young children and their families when it comes to early literacy. Emily, are there particular strategies or approaches that have emerged as effective and important for city folks to hear about and think about?

*KIRKPATRICK:* Cliff, there certainly are. One of the most challenging but also encouraging things is that the children who need extra support and intervention are likely to have parents with limited literacy skills as well. Common sense tells you what the challenge is there. There is a cycle of low literacy and education and so on, but the real opportunity there is embracing two generations at once and creating immediate impact among two generations.

So NCFL has had incredible success with a variety of programs with a wide variety of community partners in terms of embracing an intergenerational aspect of literacy and elevating the literacy level for parents and children at once. Those initiatives and programs have a wide range of focus and intensity and investment costs; everything from a mealtime literacy program delivered over a five to six week period to a more intensive program where we are bringing

parents and children into classrooms together. So there is a lot of progress and promise with looking at an intergenerational approach, looking at it as a family-unit approach, if you will. In addition a lot of the science that is coming out – and this is the work that Laura and her team spearhead – really offers a great opportunity for us to marry the science and late-breaking information with the activity that goes on. So that we can all be assured as investors in projects and so on that the activities are not just feel good, but they are actually are delivering great results. Right now we have an opportunity that communities can apply for via NCFL’s website. That is funded by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation that can bring parent workshops and materials on early literacy into local communities. We are going to be selecting three to five communities and welcome everyone on the call to apply for that. Laura, what would you like to add, or maybe what am I overlooking?

*WESTERG:* Sure. I think I want to talk a little bit about what we know and what we need to do with parents to help them overcome some of the challenges. We know that parents have a great impact on children’s literacy development and that really the greatest impact we can have is when we actually support and train parents to interact with their children around literacy. There is a small impact when parents read to their children and when they listen to their children read. The greatest impact we can have is by supporting and working with parents to engage in the literacy activities with their children.

*JOHNSON:* And so that is not an easy challenge right? I mean we heard Mayor Foster talk about the difficulties of getting out of the pattern of parents just dropping their kids off.

*WESTERG:* Exactly. I think that part of what we do at NCFL, as Emily mentioned, we kind of go to where the parents are. She mentioned the mealtime program that we are doing in restaurants in communities and we also go into and work collaboratively with preschool and childcare programs and family daycare homes to directly connect with both the caregivers and practitioners and also the parents in those programs as well.

*LANIER:* Cliff if I can add in here about family involvement? We are in the same spot. We know that those families who most need assistance in connecting with their children in this way are often the ones who are most distracted. But we found a couple of strategies that work. One of them is we have neighborhood family festivals. We have a pretty big county. We have 840 square miles, so it is a little difficult to get to everything, but in targeted neighborhoods, we have family festivals and of course the operative word is free. So we have free things to do but then kind of mixed in with the free and fun things that families can do together, we have instructional activities, and free learning games, and that kind of thing.

And then the other thing, you know, as the American Express ad says, “Membership has its privileges.” Well, membership in the Mayor’s Book Club has its privileges. Every year we have a few different things for the book club members to do. One of them is a museum hop. We have four museums in Jacksonville. And so on one particular day we have the museum hop where the book club members and their families can get into all four museums for free and then there are places in the museum where they do special book club activities. We also have a zoo day where they get in free and then we have a special event, like at our downtown library. Also when the Super Bowl was in town a few years ago, we actually

had a – part of our Super Bowl celebration was a free event for the book club members, so they were members for a really great year to get a Super Bowl event. We do those kind of things where there is a real carrot for the family to attend without cost. Now, the downside is, again we are a big county, transportation is always an uphill climb for us.

*JOHNSON:* Yes that is always a big issue. Mayor Foster and Lori in Lynchburg, what kinds of community partnerships have you tried to build to help you with these challenges around parent-family engagements and getting the word out?

*FOSTER:* Well by working with the Alliance for Families and Children we have had, as I said, success by fixing initiatives for the childcare resource center, which is located at the Alliance. That helped us get into the daycare centers. That helped us get into the home providers and with the United Way, so our organization is very connected with all the childcare centers with the neighborhood initiatives, and also with the United Way. So with early literacy there is a real, I guess, spring in our community and in our state that is just beginning to realize that this is extremely important. So I think the partnerships that we formed across – we are located in a region that has about 270,000 people but Lynchburg itself has about 70,000. But it is a regional approach that we have regional meetings around this issue with our early childhood initiative.

I think the idea of the Mayor's Book Club, however, just here in Lynchburg, it is a new initiative and with this initiative we do have some partnerships formed. For instance, the library, and some philanthropic folks in town that have thought this is a wonderful idea, the school system and hopefully our book stores – we have Barnes and Noble, we have a local book store that I have talked to – so hopefully we will have some of the things like they have going on in Florida with the general public as well. Here's Lori.

*VESINGER:* Some of our other partners are committing themselves, but not on a financial basis. Some of them are like the apartments that have helped by encouragement among their residents, and they provided space and provided enthusiasm; they have just been wonderful. They are contributing in a non-financial manner, but the enthusiasm among these people to encourage literacy to come into their communities has been very supportive.

*JOHNSON:* You know both in Lynchburg and in Jacksonville you have talked about the larger regional challenge as well as the focus of Mayor Foster and Mayor Peyton at the city level. One of the questions we have received online so far is from Portland, where they have a county library system, and they are trying to think about, you know, whether this would work on a county basis and what it would be like to try and get multiple mayors from multiple cities across the county participating and engaged. Mayor Foster or Linda Lanier, do you have a reaction to that question? Could you see it happening? Do you see any interest from surrounding mayors in what you are doing?

*LANIER:* This is Linda. We have had some interest from other mayors around the state of Florida, but I don't really think I could give a good answer to that question because the reason that the city of Jacksonville is so big is that it is also Duval County. We are one of the few

incorporated city-county governments in the United States. So we are the county and we just have one mayor.

*JOHNSON:* I see. That makes sense.

*LANIER:* It makes some things easier. It makes some things harder.

*JOHNSON:* Of course. And Mayor Foster, do you see any interest in surrounding communities?

*FOSTER:* Not yet. Hopefully. I have approached our governor and our governor has been, of course, very supportive of the idea. He thinks the general assembly would be very much, you know, willing to come here and spotlight what we are doing in Lynchburg so that we can encourage other mayors across Virginia. So to me, that is also our next step.

*JOHNSON:* We have a very practical question from a listener in Hampton, Va., about the books and/or the backpacks. One of the questions is whether children receive a full set of books all at one time or whether they are spaced out over time – you know, a book a month or whatever else. How does that work in Lynchburg for you Mayor Foster?

*FOSTER:* I am going to let Lori speak to this, because I love what she came up with and it is sort of her original idea and it is sort of an incentive for the children to come back for the next three months and I am going to let her talk about it.

*JOHNSON:* Great.

*VESINGER:* Okay. What we did is we targeted the months of April, May, and June – not summer months – because we wanted to encourage children to get into the habit of reading before summer began. We developed a Mayor's Book Club Passport, and each time we go out and visit, if they are attending, for example, the farm animals, they get a farm animal sticker in the passport. The passport contains four pages and a cover. It is bright green. It gives the children an incentive to return in May for forest animals and again in June for the wild animals. What we are hoping is that maybe if the children complete a passport, it will give them entrance into our museums. We have a wonderful children's museum here and maybe if they have completed their passport, it would give them another benefit for partaking and being a participant.

*JOHNSON:* Uh huh.

*VESINGER:* So in April we handed out books that pertained to farm animals. This month when we go out we will have forest animal books, and then next month we will have wild animal books.

*JOHNSON:* Very interesting. So membership has its privileges in Lynchburg as well.

*VESINGER:* Thanks.

*JOHNSON:* And Linda, how are you dealing with the book distribution side of this?

*LANIER:* Actually that is a very interesting question because we have had to make a change. I will tell you how we started and that was when the children attended an event, they got their backpack with all the collateral materials and the first book. It was all packed inside the backpack. If children could not attend the enrollment event, then we would deliver them to their childcare centers or they could come by our building and pick it up. So we did that for the first three years. Now we have been faced with a couple of challenges. One of them is the postal rules changed – oh and then what happened after the first book, is they would get a book in the mail once a month, so it is kind of like a book-of-the-month club. And I can tell you, the children loved it. They loved it. The parents loved it. The envelope said: “Hey it is time to get ready to read!” You know, it was just great. We could pack individual information in the envelope for the children for an event or for their parents or whatever. We never used it for marketing or fast food but informational and educational stuff.

But then, the postal rules changed and the rule was that the size of the contents has to exactly match the size of the envelope. Well our book is about a 10 x 10 book, which is the right size for little hands, but there is no standard 10 x 10 envelope. So we were either going to have to change the size of our books, which we did not want to do, or we were going to have to get custom-made envelopes. Even getting the custom-made envelopes – because we live in Florida, we can’t make a couple years worth of envelopes and have them sit around, because they get sticky and they stick together. So we finally gave up on the whole mailing thing. When the kids enroll now, they get their backpack, they get all their books at one time, and all the stuff and then we do send them postcards for events and that kind of thing but we don’t send the books in the mail anymore. That is disappointing to me but the cost just got exorbitant and then on top of that we had a couple more rate increases, so it just became too expensive. It was about a \$200,000 difference.

*JOHNSON:* So this is sort of the point at which you are in the weeds and you have to sweat the small stuff and figure out how to make it work right?

*LANIER:* Especially when the small stuff costs \$200,000.

*JOHNSON:* Exactly. Let me pause and mention that we will, in a few minutes, open the lines for questions on the line as well and perhaps the operator can explain how that will happen.

*OPERATOR:* If you would like ask a question please press star one (\*1) on your telephone key pad. That is star (\*) and the number one (1).

*JOHNSON:* Let’s continue our conversation for a few more minutes and then I will see if there are listeners in our queue who would like to pose a question. Emily, can you talk to us a bit more about some of the other recent work that National Center for Family Literacy has been doing in communities and how that has been going? What lessons you take away that would be of interest in this conversation?

*KIRKPATRICK:* I would be delighted to. NCFL really has the philosophy that it takes communities to make our work worthwhile and reach families directly. So we seek to work with as many community partners as we can. We are now working in a total of 20 communities across the nation in a very intensive way in an attempt to raise literacy levels of Hispanic adults and children, or Hispanic families. We are seeing great outcomes based upon the collaboration of mayors and school superintendents. It is bringing together those two very influential pieces of leadership that is enabling communities to really look at a system-wide approach. So that is one best practice that we are really excited about and that is known formally as The Toyota Family Literacy Program. Again, that is in 20 communities, and anyone on this call that would like to apply to be one of five cities next year is invited to watch NCFL's Web site for invitations to apply for that.

But again, it is that collaboration of the community level, at the uppermost levels of leadership where we are seeing a lot of change take place, and in so doing, we are seeing a lot of local community philanthropists wanting to invest in that vision. When they feel like there is a unified force between education and the political realm, a lot of exciting things start happening.

So that is one. The other is the dissemination that we are about to begin sharing on the National Early Literacy Panel findings. You know, really helping practitioners at the local level, from school administrators to childcare providers, implement the latest science on how children learn. So we are really excited about that and again invite communities to apply for that opportunity as well.

*JOHNSON:* Great and through our Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, here at the National League of Cities, we have been working with NCFL to figure out how to get this word out when the timing is right so that folks in cities across the country are aware of these opportunities. Let me check with the operator and see whether we have a question in the queue.

*OPERATOR:* We have a question from Katie.

*JOHNSON:* Welcome. Please go ahead with your question.

*KATIE:* Great. Thank you. I have two questions. I would like to know what the overall program cash budgets were for both cities. Also did they have any corporate sponsorships and what sort of recognition did the corporate sponsors ask for? And what kind of evaluation methods did the corporate sponsors ask for as well? Thank you.

*JOHNSON:* Great. So I know the answer of Mayor Foster to your cash budgets question, sort of, right? Although you have been raising money to cover the cost of the books, but what is the price tag for that then in Lynchburg?

*FOSTER:* Well the price tag for just a little over a hundred books or more, you know, we do need to raise monthly about \$600. We are having some contributions come in though from the library. You know, they have this wonderful van, and they have given up a whole day of time of two of their librarians, so, I mean, you know, that is not factored in to that \$600 cost. We are

hoping that we can encourage all of you small cities out there that this can be done on a very limited basis. Right now, we have been operating with less than \$2,000.

*JOHNSON:* And so that obviously allows you to operate at some scale in a small city, right? Then counterpoint in Jacksonville, a much larger community – Linda, what does the budget look like on your side?

*LANIER:* The budget just for the book club, which remember is only a part of this whole effort, is about \$500,000 a year. So that serves right around 8,500 children plus the events that we put on that go along with that.

*JOHNSON:* And Linda, have you had corporate sponsors as part of that mix?

*LANIER:* Yes we have. And the way that we acknowledge them is whatever element of backpack or whatever event they support, then we put their logo and their name on it, so we have sponsors for about, I think we are about up to 6 of our books have sponsors, so their name goes on the back of the book. Although we do not include, for example, if the sponsor was – I am just pulling one out of the hat, it is not one that we have – say Coca-Cola, that does not mean we would put a bottle of Coca-Cola inside the book as part of the storyline. We have been pretty pure about not having sponsors in the stories and keeping them pure that way, but other than that their logo is on whatever element they support, so it might be the backpack, the blanket, or the T-shirt or if they support the family festival then their logo would be on that.

*JOHNSON:* And have any of the corporate sponsor pushed you on outcomes on the ability to measure outcomes or to evaluate results from this effort?

*LANIER:* Our sponsors have not really done that. You know, our whole effort, the whole early learning effort has been focused on outcome, although the ones we look at really are what kind of outcomes we can discern as a result of our work in improving the quality in early learning centers. So that is what we are really looking at, pre- and post-testing children to determine letter recognition, concepts of print, comprehension, that kind of thing. As far as the evaluation for the book club, we have really done more parent surveys; they are more satisfaction evaluations, I would say so when we poll parents they do say things like they are more likely to read to their children, yes they do have more books in their home, you know, that kind of stuff. We don't look at educational outcomes for book club members. We really do not have any way to do that.

*JOHNSON:* Sure. Linda, I have not given you much chance to even say what the other components of your effort are, so let me give you a minute to do that too. You talked about how the book club is only one piece of this, right, and then RALLY Jacksonville!, is that a separate piece of that?

*LANIER:* RALLY Jacksonville! is really the name we put on the whole thing and Rally is just sort of what we thought was a cool word. It really does not stand for anything, but it is sort of like we are going to rally the community, or “let's rally up,” or something like that. So it does

have its own creative look. It has a logo and we use a consistent type face, so there is some consistency with that. The other pieces are – I mentioned a couple of times already – but there are the professional coaches who work in the early learning centers trying to convert their care from babysitting care to early learning care. Most on this call are very familiar with that kind of work. We are seeing progress. We are seeing that children who have been in centers that have coaches are more prepared to go to kindergarten than other children who are in centers without coaches. We are also seeing that the coach centers are able to improve their quality and therefore get higher standing in the quality star rating, which we call “Guiding Stars of Duval” and that is a partnership with the Early Learning Coalition.

Then one of the parts of the effort that I am really excited about because the need for professional development is so important, is working with our community college, the Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ). I think everybody is probably familiar with the 200 hour course called the Child Development Associate (CDA) Certificate. Well we, are working with FCCJ, and they have figured out how to articulate that 200 hour CDA course into nine credit hours of college level work and then those nine college credits will count towards an associate’s degree in early learning. Now, we just got this news last week, they can apply to the state to then expand that into a four-year degree, and that is going to be such a benefit to those people out there who are working in childcare centers, not making much money, and not able to afford the tuition of a major state school or private school. This is going to give them a low-cost alternative to still be able to get their four-year degree.

*JOHNSON:* That is great. That is very impressive. Let me pause and see if the operator has another questioner on the line.

*OPERATOR:* There are no more questions in queue.

*JOHNSON:* Okay. That is great because I have plenty more questions left and we only have a little less than ten minutes left to talk. So you know, I guess one of the big picture questions is about advice to other city leaders, right? You know, if they get this message and understand the importance of early literacy, but haven’t gotten started yet, in what direction would you steer them and what advice would you have? Let me start with the National Center for Family Literacy. Emily, do you have a thought about where you would steer folks and what advice, based on the wealth of work and experience that NCFL has done?

*KIRKPATRICK:* Our advice would be to be very thoughtful at the beginning in terms of scoping out the program and, you know, making strategic decisions about target audience, intensity, duration, that type of thing. It is by that scoping that you can both measure the impact at the various levels, as well as have more success in obtaining sponsorship and that type of a thing.

The second thing is somewhat tactical but it is also encouraging and that is for ideas like book clubs at the local level there tends to be a lot of resources among book sellers that would like to give donations, in kind donations and so on. So that could be a resource and I am speaking from – you know, I probably field two phone calls a week from different book sellers wanting to give books away. If not at the local level, I know most of the major publishers will not charge shipping or certainly not tax to efforts such as the ones we have been describing

today. So, I will throw that out and shipping is sometimes quite expensive, so I throw that out as just a very tactical piece that may interest a lot of people.

*JOHNSON:* That is great. Laura Westerg from NCFL would you add to that?

*WESTERG:* Sure. I would like to add one thing. I think what Emily said is certainly the best way to go, but one of the things that I think you need to remember to do also is gather some of the experts in the area of literacy and reading to engage in the effort in pre-planning to sort of make those strategic decisions that are going to have that impact.

*JOHNSON:* And so, if I am sitting in a medium-sized community somewhere out in the country, what would I be thinking about? Reaching out to a local university for that kind of advice?

*WESTERG:* Sure. Yes. Obviously if there is a local university, a community college that has an early childhood program, libraries that have children's librarians, as well as the school system. You know, reading specialists and reading coaches in the school system can offer excellent advice and help in that way.

*JOHNSON:* Those are great thoughts. So even if you are not in a college town or whatever you can be turning both to your library folk and your school folks for help. Mayor Foster, Lori, in Lynchburg, do you have advice for our listeners?

*FOSTER:* Well, I think that definitely if you are a mayor and you have zero resources, if you have a public library in or near your city, that would be a wonderful starting point. But then you also have to probably sell city managers and deputy-city managers. Going to them and selling the idea and bringing in the key folks that are already in the city to buy into this and then once you have the connections with the town and other entities. Our community college also offers the CDA and we actually teach it here at the Alliance – a year-long class – so we already had that buy in that early literacy is very important in our community. So if that thought is already there, I mean, you can just hook onto that and carry it on to another level, which I think is a step in another level where you are getting a board commitment from more people than just folks who are interested in probably education and early literacy.

*VESINGER:* I would like to include newspaper coverage because we had some wonderful press events and we have received many unsolicited calls from interested people in the community who wanted to know how they can participate either with efforts. As a matter of fact, a musician is coming along – someone who would like to participate by playing a guitar and bringing live music.

*JOHNSON:* And so both of you are reminding us that, you know, like anything else you are trying to sell and promote at the city level, you have to reach out, build your constituencies and think about who the key stakeholders and decision-makers are. Think about your public communications strategies as well as your programmatic strategies to make sure that you have

the breadth of support that you need to make a go of this. Linda, any last words of advice for folks about how to move forward or how to get started?

*LANIER:* Well I think partnerships, because we are not all good at everything. So I think what has been the key of our success – though also our most difficult work because partnerships aren't easy – is getting everybody that needed to be around the table there and some brought pretty interesting contributions to this effort. For example, Nemours, which is a local children's medical service – actually out of Connecticut, but there is an operation here in Jacksonville – has brought a dyslexia screening program, and they are screening thousands of three- and four-year-olds for dyslexia and then providing reading therapy for those children who are identified in this screening tool. So at the beginning of this thing, almost five years ago, we didn't even have a thought that we could actually provide dyslexia screening as part of this program, but now we do because we got more people around the table. So you never know what is going to pop up.

*JOHNSON:* Thank you so much. We are at the end of our hour. I want to thank all of you, as our panelists and speakers, for these great thoughts. I am wondering – I am sure there will be folks who have been listening who would like to follow up with a question or to learn more information. I guess one first question would be if there are Web sites that would be useful resources for folks? I know NCFL has a great website, right? Can you give that Web site address?

*KIRKPATRICK:* Sure is it [www.famlit.org](http://www.famlit.org).

*JOHNSON:* So, [www.famlit.org](http://www.famlit.org). Okay. And in Jacksonville, Linda, is there a Web resource for folks?

*LANIER:* Our website is [www.jaxkids.net](http://www.jaxkids.net).

*JOHNSON:* Wonderful. Mayor Foster, is there anything available on the Web based on what you have done?

*FOSTER:* Our Web site in the city does not have it as of yet, but that is the next step. I want to go to that and have that established. But in the interim, you can email me at [joan@alliancecva.org](mailto:joan@alliancecva.org)

*JOHNSON:* Well with your permission, all of you on the call, we will go ahead and follow up with email addresses for our listeners so that they can reach you by email as well. So, you are ahead of me there Mayor Foster, I appreciate it. Thank you again, so much, to all five of you for all these good thoughts and ideas. Let me just mention again for our listeners, this is part of a monthly series of calls that we host through the National League of Cities and its Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. Our next call is scheduled for Thursday, June 19<sup>th</sup>. It will be at 2:30 p.m. Eastern time. That is 2:30 p.m. Eastern time on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June and the topic is “Banking the Unbanked: City Partnerships to Connect Families with Mainstream Financial Services.”

The National League of Cities and our Institute for Youth, Education, and Families has an exciting new effort called our Bank on Cities Campaign. There are some great ideas to share about how city leaders can work to make sure to work with their nonprofit partners, their United Way partners, their financial institutions to make sure that families and particularly low-income families are part of our mainstream financial system and have access to those services and opportunities. Thank you to our listeners for joining today. We so much appreciate you being with us. We look forward to hearing from you on our next call. Thanks again to our speakers. We appreciate you being with us. Take care.