Out-of-School Time NYC Reads Toolkit

Cultivating Coherence Across the Literacy Day

Supporting Aligned, Enriching, and Joyful Literacy Experiences Across In-School and Out-of-School Settings

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About CPRL

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Acknowledgements

This toolkit is the result of deep collaboration across New York City's literacy ecosystem. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the educators, out-of-school time (OST) providers, school leaders, and partners who contributed their insights, time, and commitment to strengthening literacy experiences for all young people.

Project Leads

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Acknowledgements

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Families, advocates, and community members who nurture a love of learning at home and in their communities—your partnership is essential to building a truly literacy-rich ecosystem.

We especially acknowledge the **students of New York City**—whose brilliance, curiosity, and potential inspire this work every day.

Cultivating Alignment:
Introduction to the Toolkit

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Young people's outcomes are stronger when schools and out-of-school time (OST) providers[1] work together as partners. With NYC Reads—New York City Public Schools' citywide initiative to ensure all students become skilled, confident readers by 2035—the district is doubling down on one of the most fundamental promises we make as a society to children: to teach them how to read. Achieving the city's bold goal will require deep collaboration across the educational ecosystem, including classroom educators, school leaders, OST providers, and families, all of whom support students after school, during the summer, and in their communities.

To support this vision, the Columbia University Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL), in partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), NYCPS, and ExpandED Schools, developed this OST Literacy Toolkit with support from The Carmel Hill Fund and special thanks to The Robertson Foundation. The toolkit is designed to strengthen coherence between in-school and out-of-school learning—reinforcing and extending what students are learning during the school day in ways that are joyful, affirming, and grounded in community.

Rather than asking you to start from scratch, this toolkit builds on the strengths already present in OST settings—including strong ties to families and communities, trusting relationships with students, and a longstanding commitment to whole-child development. It offers a flexible, actionable set of tools that supports you in creating literacy-rich environments across the full day. In many schools and center and community-based programs, collaboration between OST staff and school-day educators may already happen organically—through relationships built over time and a shared investment in young people. This toolkit is here to help you take that work further by offering intentional tools, strategies, and structures to plan alongside schools in a coherent and connected way.

That's where this toolkit comes in.

Whether you're leading an afterschool club, planning a summer field trip, or designing a family engagement activity, these resources are meant to meet you where you are. The goal is not for you to do more—it's to help guide you in what you are already doing with purpose, connection, and impact. The tools included here will help you understand what students are learning during the school day and offer aligned, engaging programming that reinforces and celebrates that learning.

[1] In New York City, Out-of-School Time (OST) providers are community-based organizations (CBOs), nonprofits, and public agencies that partner with schools, families, and neighborhoods to support young people beyond the regular school day—after school, on weekends, during holidays, and throughout the summer.

Picture this

During the school day, 3rd grader Zion's ELA class is in Module 2 of *Wit & Wisdom*, learning about the essential question: "Why do people explore?" Through read-alouds and writing prompts, he's reading about real-world adventurers and investigating different kinds of journeys.

That same week in his afterschool program, Zion and his peers are building cardboard boats in a STEM challenge and reflecting on what it would take to cross the Hudson River. A staff member says, "Remember what you read about Lewis and Clark?" and Zion lights up: "We talked about that in my ELA class!"

That spark of connection—between classroom content and afterschool creativity—is literacy in action. Zion is building vocabulary, confidence, and background knowledge across both settings.

Moments like this are what we're working toward.

This toolkit helps you make more of them happen—by planning programming, training staff, and engaging families in ways that are aligned, joyful, and rooted deeply in what you already do well.

Key Messages

In addition to sharing innovative strategies and promising practices, OST providers across New York City have emphasized several powerful truths:

1

Literacy is a shared responsibility.

Supporting students' reading development doesn't stop when the school day ends. OST educators play a vital role in creating joyful, content-rich learning environments that reinforce and extend what students are learning in school. When schools and programs collaborate intentionally, they can create a seamless and supportive literacy experience.

2

OST providers bring unique assets to the table.

From strong relationships with families to creative project-based learning experiences grounded in positive youth development, OST staff know how to engage students in meaningful ways. You don't need to replicate classroom instruction to support NYC Reads—you can build on what you already do well and embed key literacy practices into your programming.

3

Collaboration works best when it's two-way.

Coherence across school and OST settings requires ongoing communication, trust, and mutual respect. Principals and school leaders benefit from understanding the goals, structures, and successes of OST programs—just as you benefit from insight into students' day-to-day experiences, curriculum pacing, and literacy priorities.

4

There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Every school community and OST program is different. You might co-plan family literacy nights, host read-alouds, integrate vocabulary into enrichment activities, plan field trips, or create arts-based storytelling projects. All of these approaches are valid and valuable. The goal of this resource is to support and celebrate the diversity of providers who touch and enrich young people's lives.

Together, we can build a city where every student, in every community, is surrounded by consistent, affirming, and high-quality literacy experiences— in school, after school, and beyond.

Sample Strategy:
Tending the Garden Together

Sample Strategy: Tending the Garden Together

New York City is facing a challenge—and an opportunity. Too many students are not yet meeting literacy benchmarks. But with NYC Reads, for the first time, we have a shared curriculum and citywide momentum toward a clear goal: that by 2035, all students will be thriving readers and writers.

Out-of-school time (OST) providers have always played a powerful role in children's learning. You create joyful, affirming spaces where young people feel seen, supported, and inspired to learn. You do this work because you care deeply about your students and want them to succeed—not only in school, but in life.

Reaching literacy goals is central to that success. OST providers and New York City Public Schools share this commitment. The Out-of-School Time NYC Reads Toolkit is designed to help you work together toward that shared vision—bridging learning across classrooms, afterschool programs, and communities so every child can grow as a confident, curious reader and writer.

Think of this toolkit as a garden bed—

a place to plant, nourish, and grow strategies for coherence. Every OST provider will approach this work differently, depending on school partnerships, program structures, and staff experience. The toolkit is flexible, and you do not need to use the resources in a set order.

Instead, consider how your team might **GROW** the garden by engaging in one or more of the following areas of work:

G — **Ground in shared purpose:** Develop coherence across school and OST systems through a common literacy vision.

R — **Reinforce with aligned practice:** Ensure every setting contributes to literacy skill and knowledge development.

O — **Optimize Adult Capacity:** Invest in professional learning and coaching for OST educators.

W — **Weave a literacy ecosystem:** Integrate families, communities, and partners into a shared effort to grow readers.

NYC Public Schools

Sample Strategy: G.R.O.W. Together

The strategy outlined below is presented as a logic model—a set of coordinated actions that are expected to lead to both short-term and long-term literacy outcomes. While this model can be used as-is, it is most effective when adapted to reflect the specific goals, needs, and assets of your local school community.

If OST providers **and** school leaders work together to **G.R.O.W:**

G

Ground in shared purpose. Develop coherence across school and OST systems by aligning on a common literacy vision, co-creating goals, and understanding how each setting contributes to student growth.

R

Reinforce with aligned practice. Ensure every setting contributes to literacy skill and knowledge development. This includes planning enrichment activities that build on school-day instruction, reinforcing reading, writing, speaking, and listening in joyful and culturally affirming ways.

O

Optimize adult capacity. Equip OST staff with practical, evidence-based strategies through targeted professional learning and coaching.

W

Weave a literacy ecosystem. Integrate families, communities, and partners into a shared effort to grow readers—by sharing tools, celebrating progress, and centering literacy across all spaces where children learn and grow.

Sample Strategy: G.R.O.W. Together

Then...

Students will benefit from a seamless, coherent literacy experience across in-school and out-of-school time, with consistent reinforcement and opportunities to practice and grow.

OST providers and school leaders will build shared language, coordinate planning structures, and deepen mutual understanding of each other's roles and strengths.

Families will continue to feel connected and empowered as partners in their children's literacy journeys.

Literacy will become a shared ecosystem priority—woven through instruction, enrichment, and everyday life.

As a result...

New York City will make meaningful progress toward its 2035 goal of full literacy for all school-aged youth—powered by collaboration, coherence, and a collective commitment to joyful, equitable learning.

How to Use This Toolkit:
Tending the Literacy Garden

Every provider starts in a different place. This toolkit is designed to be flexible. Whether you're just getting oriented to NYC Reads or already deep in alignment work with schools, the tools here can help you move forward.

How to Use This Toolkit

The resources in this toolkit are designed to help OST leaders and staff connect their existing strengths to the content and instructional shifts of NYC Reads.

Not sure where to start? Use the Seeds of Partnership section to engage school partners, understand what NYC Reads is, and explore the foundational literacy shifts that are shaping instruction across the city.

Want to align programming? The Planning Aligned Programming section walks you through how to plan enrichment themes, activities, and field trips that build students' background knowledge and reinforce what they're learning in class.

Need to build staff capacity? The Training Staff to Reinforce Literacy section includes ready-to-use professional learning modules aligned to the Science of Reading and designed for non-certified educators.

Looking to engage families and community? The Partnering with Families & Communities section includes multilingual letters, curated resources, and strategies to extend literacy support at home.

Whether you're leading an afterschool club, planning a summer field trip, or designing a family event, these resources are meant to meet you where you are. Remember: the goal is not for you to do more—it's to guide you in what you are already doing with purpose, connection, and impact.

Building Toward Continuous Improvement

Finally, this toolkit is part of a larger movement toward continuous learning and reflection across NYC's literacy ecosystem. We encourage programs to use the tools not only to implement aligned practices, but also to reflect on what's working, identify areas of growth, and share bright spots with partners, families, and communities. A culture of improvement is essential to our shared progress toward the 2035 goal: every student in New York City reading with confidence, joy, and skill.

Seeds of Partnership:
Laying the Groundwork for Literacy Growth

Every great garden starts with healthy soil—and the same is true for literacy partnerships. Out-of-School Time (OST) providers across New York City are already cultivating literacy growth every day through their programs. You are essential partners in advancing student literacy outcomes, and your work is a key part of NYC Reads' vision for all students to become thriving readers and writers by 2035.

This section is designed to help you "assess the soil" and prepare the garden bed for even stronger collaboration with schools. The tools here will guide you in deepening or re-engaging partnerships with school leaders, using resources like the **Collaboration Protocol** and **Community Partner Guide** to spark intentional conversations and build shared strategies.

You'll also "get the lay of the land" of the NYC Reads garden itself—learning what NYC Reads is, what the Science of Reading really means, and which literacy curricula are being used across the city. The **Searchable Curriculum Tool** will help you and your staff pinpoint the exact curricula being implemented at your students' school sites, so you know what they're learning in literacy—and when—throughout the school year.

These tools represent the planting stage of your literacy garden. By grounding your work in shared information and partnerships, you'll be able to align your enrichment efforts with classroom learning—without duplicating instruction—so students experience a seamless, joyful literacy journey from school to OST to home.

Community Partner Guidance

These two tools offer practical, research-based support for stronger day school–OST collaboration. The **Community Partner Guide** provides clear "dos and don'ts" for designing literacy activities that align with the Science of Reading, while the **5-Step Collaboration Protocol** offers a simple structure for OST and school teams to co-plan, align, and celebrate shared literacy efforts.

5-Step Collaboration Protocol for School & OST Alignment

The 5-Step Collaboration Protocol is a simple planning tool that helps OST providers and school leaders align their literacy efforts through structured conversations held three times per year. These meetings focus on setting goals, co-planning literacy touchpoints, and celebrating shared successes.

How to use it:

- Schedule regular planning meetings with your school partners throughout the year, if you do not already have them. We recommend meeting at least three times—once in the fall to set shared goals, in the winter to reflect and adjust, and in the spring to plan forward.

- Print and bring the protocol to each planning meeting to guide your agenda and structure your conversation.

- Use the five steps as a ready-made agenda to guide your conversations—from sharing goals to celebrating progress.

- Share the protocol with your teams so that OST staff and school-based staff understand the rhythm, purpose, and outcomes of these conversations.

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Community Partner Guide

This **"Dos and Don'ts"** guide offers OST providers practical, research-aligned recommendations for literacy activities that complement school-day instruction and reflect the Science of Reading. The guide was developed by members of the New York City Public Schools Literacy Collaborative, the Department of Youth and Community Development, and ExpandED Schools.

How to use it:

- Print and share with your team during staff meetings or professional learning sessions to guide literacy-aligned planning.

- Use it to evaluate current literacy practices—identify what you're already doing well and where small shifts may help align more closely with Science of Reading principles.

- Bring it to school-OST collaboration meetings to demonstrate your commitment to NYC Reads and foster shared understanding with school partners.

- Inspire new ideas by using the "Dos" list to expand activities you already offer, such as debates or arts-based projects, while avoiding outdated strategies like memorization without context.

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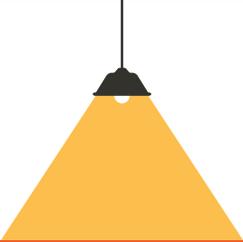
Bright Spots
Examples of Strong Partnerships

Start small and focus on shared priorities. One school used the 5-Step Collaboration Protocol to indentify two focus areas—vocabulary and fluency—so after-school staff could concentrate on high-impact practices.

Make collaboration part of instructional routines. At another school, the community school director joined the principal's instructional walks and data meetings, analyzing which students participating in afterschool also needed additional academic support.

Create visible, ongoing communication. In one partnership, the principal invited the community school director to join leadership team meetings so that the community school director understood the broader school priorities without requiring additional meetings.

Leverage existing strengths. Several schools invited after-school staff to join the school's weekly attendance-team meetings to support family outreach, mentor students with high absenteeism, and share ideas for boosting student engagement. This approach built trust and strengthened collaboration between afterschool and school-day staff.

Understanding NYCPS Literacy Curricula

For the first time, NYC Public Schools aligned around a shared, research-based literacy approach—**NYC Reads**— including a shared approach and shared curriculum creating greater coherence across classrooms and schools. This moment represents a powerful opportunity for out-of-school time (OST) programs to align and amplify what students are learning during the school day.

We know OST providers already play a vital role in supporting students' literacy growth. But with new buzzwords like the *Science of Reading*, curriculum names like *EL Education* or *HMH Into Reading*, and evolving citywide priorities, it can be hard to know where to begin. That's where this set of overview tools comes in. Think of them as your "orientation guide" to NYC Reads—helping you and your team build shared understanding of what's changing, why it matters, and how your work connects.

These tools are perfect for grounding yourself in the big picture and introducing staff to the basics. Use them during team meetings or professional development sessions to build confidence, clarity, and a sense of shared momentum. The more we understand the garden we're growing in, the better we can plant seeds that thrive.

NYC Reads Overview

NYC Reads is the city-wide initiative to ensure every student receives high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction grounded in the Science of Reading—a comprehensive body of research on how children learn to read and what practices are most effective—with the ultimate goal that every child in New York City becomes a confident, skilled reader.

NYC Reads Overview (1-pager)

How to use it:

- Print out this 1-pager and share it with your team during staff meetings, training sessions, or partnership planning conversations. It's a quick, clear overview of NYC Reads that can help everyone understand the city's approach to literacy.

- Use it to get aligned, spark discussion, and build a shared foundation with school partners and families.

Get Resource »

Science of Reading (1-pager)

How to use it:

This one-pager is a simple way to help staff and families understand the research behind NYC Reads and why it matters. OST providers can:

- Print and distribute the handout during team meetings or professional development sessions.

- Post it in shared staff areas (e.g., office bulletin boards or program binders) as a quick reference.

- Share it with families during orientations or literacy nights to explain how OST programming supports what students are learning in school.

- Use it as a staff training warm-up—have teams read it together and reflect on how the principles connect to your own programming.

Get Resource »

NYC Reads Curricula

As a start, all NYCPS elementary schools are implementing one of three evidence-based literacy curricula: EL Education, Wit & Wisdom, or HMH Into Reading. Districts are adding middle schools in school year 2026-27 and school year 2027-28. Each of these programs is grounded in the *Science of Reading* and designed to build students' foundational skills, background knowledge, and comprehension abilities. However, they differ in structure, pacing, and featured texts.

To support OST providers in orienting themselves and their staff, the toolkit includes a curriculum-specific one-pager for each of the three programs. These one-pagers provide a high-level overview of the curriculum's design, themes, and instructional features.

How to use it:

- Start by identifying which curriculum is used in your school's district using the **Curriculum Tool**.

- Print and review the corresponding one-pager with your team to build a shared understanding of the instructional approach and literacy focus areas.

- Use the one-pager as a reference when designing enrichment activities, planning field trips, or aligning content with school-day instruction.

- Keep it handy as a quick refresher throughout the year to stay grounded in your students' academic context.

Curriculum (1-pager)

EL Education

Get Resource »

HMH Into Reading

Get Resource »

Wit & Wisdom

Get Resource »

Additional Resources

Website

The [NYCPS NYC Reads Website](#) is a central hub for key information, guidance, and resources that support the city's literacy initiative. It includes documents outlining instructional shifts, as well as guidance on curriculum implementation and professional learning tools. School teams and community partners can use the site to stay aligned with NYCPS expectations, access curriculum-specific supports, and deepen their understanding of how evidence-based literacy practices are being rolled out across the city.

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Case Study

This infographic highlights key insights from school staff, families, and district leaders. It can be used to spark discussion, reflect on local practices, and identify opportunities for school-OST collaboration grounded in both what's working and what's needed to move forward.

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YouTube Episodes

The NYC Reads YouTube episodes offer a dynamic way for school leaders, OST providers, and families to see NYC Reads in action. The NYCPS Office of Knowledge Management highlights how Community School District 1 is scaling NYC Reads—with insights from school leaders, students, families, elected officials, and community advocates. These videos are ideal for sparking conversations around what effective literacy implementation looks like in real schools and communities. They're also a great tool for professional learning, staff development, or family engagement events.

Watch Video >>

Watch Video >>

Search Smarter with the NYC Reads Curriculum Finder

The searchable curriculum tool takes the guesswork out of alignment. Instead of flipping through pacing guides, you can search by district or school name, filter by grade level and/or date, and instantly see the exact curriculum, essential questions, book lists, and themes students are working on during the school day.

How to Use the NYC Reads Curriculum Finder:

- **During program planning:** Quickly check what topics and texts students will encounter at any given time in school.

- **When designing activities:** Use the essential questions and book lists to build enrichment projects, field trips, or discussions that connect directly to classroom learning.

- **For staff prep:** Share search results with frontline staff so they know what students are learning and can reinforce those ideas in OST.

- **To communicate with families:** Highlight school-day connections in newsletters or conversations to show how OST is supporting literacy growth.

With just a few clicks, you can see what's happening in the classroom and design enrichment activities that are timely, relevant, and directly connected to NYC Reads.

What You Can Do with the NYC Reads Curriculum Finder:

- **Filter** by district, school, grade, or date

- **View** curriculum details, including module, theme, and date range

- **Display** essential questions to guide planning and discussions

- **See** text genres used in each unit

- **Access** complete reading lists, with each book linked as a clickable resource

Here's how to make the most of it:

- **Search by your setting:** Filter by district, school, grade, or date to narrow results to the students you serve.

- **Review what's being taught:** See the curriculum, module, theme, and date range for the selected grade or school.

- **Note key learning goals:** Check the essential questions, writing themes, and text genres to understand what skills and ideas students are working on.

- **Select texts:** Use the clickable reading lists to preview or pull the same books being used in classrooms.

- **Plan your OST activities:** Design projects, trips, or discussions that connect to what students are learning—whether you're previewing a topic, reinforcing it, or extending it in new ways.

Get Resource »

*Reading List: This booklist has been curated by The Office of Library Services, NYC School Library System. It is a set of recommended texts that align with themes, topics, or genres of the NYC Reads curriculum selected by districts.

Aligning Programming:
Growing Literacy Through Knowledge-Based Experiences

One of the most powerful ways out-of-school time (OST) providers can support NYC Reads is by designing programming that reflects the content students are engaging with during the school day. Literacy isn't just built during a reading block—it grows when young people develop background knowledge, use language in a variety of ways and contexts, and make meaningful connections throughout their daily experiences. With NYC Reads bringing a shared curriculum to schools citywide for the first time, OST programs have a unique opportunity to reinforce and extend that learning through joyful, creative, and culturally responsive experiences.

By using these tools together, OST leaders and staff can create programming that is not only fun and engaging, but also deeply connected to students' literacy journeys.

Plan with Curriculum Snapshots

Curriculum Snapshots give out-of-school time (OST) providers a clear, one-page view of the entire school year for the NYC Reads curriculum—EL Education, Wit & Wisdom, and HMH Into Reading. Unlike the Curriculum One-Pagers, which offer a high-level summary of each curriculum's structure and instructional design, the Snapshots are more operational. They lay out all grade levels, module titles, and date ranges in one visual. These tools are especially helpful at the start of the year when mapping out program themes, and remain a useful reference point during ongoing planning.

How to Use This Tool:

- **Check upcoming modules:** Look at what topics students will study in each grade.

- **Plan activities around themes:** Use the module titles to inspire enrichment projects, trips, or book selections. When you're ready to brainstorm specific activity ideas, see the **Generating Knowledge-Rich Activities Protocol in the next section.** This protocol can be revisited throughout the year as new modules begin.

- **Decide on timing:**

  - Before school exposure – Build background knowledge (e.g., visit a space museum in October if "Outer Space" begins in November).

  - During – Reinforce what students are learning with related activities.

  - After – Revisit themes to deepen comprehension and spark connections.

- **Apply flexibly:** Even if the timing isn't exact, exposure to related knowledge before, during, or after school instruction will strengthen literacy growth.

By revisiting the snapshots regularly, your team can keep programming relevant and connected to what students are learning in school.

At-a-Glance Curriculum Snapshots

For the NYC Reads curriculum (EL Education, HMH Into Reading, and Wit & Wisdom), these one-page overviews—easy to print or share with staff—show the entire year in one place, including module names, grade levels, and date ranges.

EL Education

Get Resource »

HMH Into Reading

Get Resource »

Wit & Wisdom

Get Resource »

Go Deeper with Pacing Guides

For more detailed planning, out-of-school time (OST) providers can use the curriculum pacing guides. These guides go beyond the at-a-glance snapshots to include essential questions, writing themes, and direct links to the core texts students will use in school.*

How to Use This Tool:

- **During staff meetings or planning sessions:** Review upcoming units together so your team knows the themes, texts, and big questions students will encounter.

- **To plan enrichment activities:** Use the essential questions and writing themes as inspiration for discussions, art projects, field trips, or writing prompts. When you're ready to generate concrete activity ideas, move to **Connecting the Tools** in the next section. This protocol can be used at the start of each new unit throughout the year.

- **Connect with texts:** Incorporate related read-alouds or supplemental books so students encounter the same topics in multiple settings.

- **Support student voice:** Encourage students to share what they're reading in school and build from those connections in OST activities.

By intentionally drawing from pacing guides, OST providers can design activities that extend school-day learning, reinforce literacy skills, and make enrichment experiences feel purposeful and connected.

Detailed Pacing Guides

EL Education

Get Resource »

HMH Into Reading

Get Resource »

Wit & Wisdom

Get Resource »

*Note: Pacing guides are currently available for elementary school. Instructional timing and module dates may shift year over year, so always refer to the latest available version.

Connecting the Tools

Out-of-school time (OST) providers can start by using **Curriculum Snapshots** for a quick overview or the more detailed **Pacing Guides** for deeper context. Both tools help staff understand the themes, essential questions, texts, and timing of what students are learning in school.

Once that foundation is clear, teams can move into the **Generating Knowledge-Rich Activities Protocol** to brainstorm enrichment ideas that build on those themes.

By pairing these tools, OST providers can confidently design activities that are coherent with NYC Reads while also creative, flexible, and responsive to their program context.

Generating Knowledge-Rich Activities Aligned to NYC Reads Curriculum

This resource is a step-by-step planning tool that helps OST providers design enrichment activities that connect to what students are learning in school. By aligning with grade-level themes and module content, the tool supports coherence while encouraging creative, engaging, and culturally responsive programming.

Additional Resources:

- Planning Templates

  - **EL Education**
  - **HMH Into Reading**
  - **Wit & Wisdom**

- See this **example** from Community School District 1, showing how OST partners and school leaders collaboratively planned theme-based extensions aligned to the **EL Education** curriculum. You can also reference the **slide deck** from that CBO Planning Meeting.

How to use it:

- **Use during planning time or PD:** Program directors or site leaders can facilitate this protocol during staff meetings or professional learning sessions.

- **Print copies of the protocol and pair with the NYC Reads Curriculum Snapshot, Pacing Guides or Searchable Curriculum Tool.** Staff can work in grade-level or content-aligned groups to generate 1–2 enrichment activities per module.

- **Choose 1–2 ideas to pilot per grade and embed them into your program calendar.** You don't need to do everything—start with small, meaningful connections that reinforce what students are learning in school.

- **Share with school partners:** Use the protocol as a bridge during "meetings between your program and the school to show how your program is reinforcing classroom content and building coherence.

- **Highlight the creativity and flexibility of OST:** This tool supports alignment without restricting your approach—lean into culturally responsive, youth-driven, and hands-on learning strategies.

Get Resource »

Learning Beyond the School Walls

Field trips offer powerful opportunities for students to make real-world connections, explore their communities, and expand their sense of what's possible. When thoughtfully planned, these experiences reinforce and deepen the learning that takes place in classrooms and out-of-school time (OST) programs.

By working together, OST providers and school leaders can identify field trips and out-of-classroom experiences that align with the themes, content, and goals of the NYC Reads curriculum—creating rich, engaging extensions of literacy learning beyond school walls.

Generating Knowledge-Rich Field Trip Ideas Aligned to NYC Reads Curriculum

How to use it:

- Print and review the tool during planning meetings, especially when organizing upcoming trips for specific grades. Use the tool to identify relevant field trip themes and experiences.

- Collaborate with school partners to time trips thoughtfully—e.g., plan visits before a module starts to build background knowledge, or after it wraps to deepen understanding.

- Use as a brainstorming tool to generate fresh ideas for meaningful, literacy-rich trips across cultural institutions, museums, parks, and neighborhoods.

- Post-trip reflection: Encourage staff and students to connect their experience back to the big questions, vocabulary, or texts they're reading in school.

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Additional Resource:

- **Example Field Trip Planning Template** aligned to NYC Reads
  PDF | Google Doc

Bright Spots
Example of field trip planning aligned to NYC Reads

District 1 mapped out field trips for each module of the EL Education curriculum across grades K–5. This bright spot showcases how a district can creatively and strategically align enrichment opportunities with core literacy instruction—ensuring that students encounter key themes, vocabulary, and ideas across both the school day and out-of-school time.

For example, in 5th grade, students learned about biodiversity in the rainforest during Module 2. To deepen and extend that learning, the OST and school team co-planned a field trip to the Hall of Biodiversity at the American Museum of Natural History. This experience helped students connect classroom content to the real world—exploring ecosystems, species diversity, and conservation efforts firsthand.

By connecting each module to a thoughtfully selected field trip, D1 is helping students build background knowledge, see learning come to life, and engage with the world around them in meaningful, literacy-rich ways!

Map a Student's Literacy Journey

Understanding a student's full literacy journey means looking beyond a single classroom or afterschool program. By mapping a student's experiences across settings, teams can uncover ways to build alignment, elevate student voice, and create more seamless literacy support throughout the day.

Student Literacy Journey Reflection Protocol

This protocol helps OST teams reflect on how literacy shows up across students' school-day, OST, and home experiences—and identify opportunities to strengthen alignment and support. Designed for use by program directors or site leaders, it guides staff through a sample student journey to surface bright spots, identify gaps, and align on practical next steps. It can also be adapted for joint sessions with school leaders when deeper alignment is a goal.

How to use it:

- **Print and distribute the protocol** during team meetings or professional development sessions. Have staff walk through the sample student journey together, then reflect on how literacy shows up in your own program.

- **Use it for school-OST collaboration:** Bring it to a joint meeting with a school leader to co-reflect and plan more connected supports.

- **Repeat periodically** (e.g., fall, midyear, spring) to track changes, celebrate progress, and keep students at the center.

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Bright Spots
Using Day School Data in Afterschool

At one school, the principal and community school director used midyear data to identify gaps in reading growth. They restructured afterschool groups so second graders needing fluency practice received daily reading support aligned with classroom targets and pacing.

Rooted in Alignment:
Building Staff Capacity to Support Literacy

Rooted in Alignment: Building Staff Capacity to Support Literacy

One of the most powerful ways OST leaders can help advance NYC's shared literacy goals is by investing in staff skill-building. OST educators already support literacy every day—through read-alouds, project-based learning, conversations, games, and more. By offering targeted training, leaders can equip their teams to do this work with even more confidence and impact.

This section features a growing set of tools to help OST leaders and educators build staff knowledge, boost instructional confidence, and strengthen literacy-aligned practices across programs. Currently, it includes a series of short, research-based instructional modules created by ExpandED Schools, specifically for non-certified educators working in OST and enrichment settings. These modules are curriculum-agnostic and aligned to the Science of Reading, offering easy-to-implement strategies for supporting students' reading and language development, without duplicating school-day instruction. Each one is brief, free, and designed to integrate into staff meetings, onboarding sessions, or ongoing professional development.

More tools will be added here over time to further strengthen literacy-aligned practice across the OST workforce.

Bright Spots
Building Staff Capacity Across NYC

There are many ways out-of-school time providers are strengthening adult capacity to support literacy:

Cascade learning through existing structures. One large provider sends staff to the district's literacy trainings, then shares key takeaways through its own professional development system—ensuring hundreds of site leaders and educators receive consistent guidance citywide.

Reinforce classroom practices in after-school spaces. At one school, afterschool staff learned the same student discussion protocols used during the day, helping children practice academic talk and collaboration across settings.

Equip staff with simple, high-impact strategies. In another program, school leaders modeled easy-to-learn routines like choral and echo reading so afterschool educators could confidently support fluency and vocabulary development.

Building the Basics: Literacy Instructional Skills for All Educators

This section features a series of literacy instructional skill-building modules created by ExpandED Schools. These modules—built from two initiatives, Lit C.R.E.W. (Connect, Read to Research, Explore, Wrap-Up) and Ready Readers— are evidence-based, and usable by any OST program.

- Lit C.R.E.W. offers a two-hour course designed to help staff engage students in building background knowledge, deep vocabulary, and project-based literacy experiences grounded in the Science of Reading.

- Ready Readers is a multi-module professional-learning series that supports educators in creating safe, supportive spaces for reading, facilitating comprehension questions, teaching vocabulary, and designing extension activities for engaged, independent readers.

These modules are easy to implement, brief, and ready to use—they're designed for non-certified educators working in OST and enrichment settings. By introducing your team to them, you'll build adult capacity, strengthen literacy practice across your program, and reinforce what students are learning during the school day.

You can access the workshops **here.**

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Nurturing Literacy Beyond the Program Day:
Partnering with Families and Communities

Nurturing Literacy Beyond the Program Day: Partnering with Families and Communities

The third way OST providers can help drive literacy gains is by partnering with families and community organizations to reinforce reading, writing, and language development at home. Families are a child's first teachers, and OST programs often serve as trusted connectors between home and school. That's why this section offers curated, family-friendly resources that are easy to share and aligned with NYC Reads priorities.

These tools center joyful, everyday literacy practices that can happen anywhere—in the kitchen, on the bus, or at bedtime. Whether you're hosting a family event, sending materials home for a school break, or updating your website or bulletin board, these ready-to-go resources can help build literacy habits across all the places where children learn.

How to use it:

- Print and distribute at family workshops and events.

- Include in take-home kits before summer or school breaks to encourage year-round reading.

- Post resources on program websites or in newsletters.

- Highlight one resource at a time in weekly family communications to keep literacy top of mind with simple, actionable tips

- Coordinate with school partners to understand what messaging is already being shared through the **NYC Reads Family Partnership Toolkit**

Resources

For all ages

- **Reading Rockets Reading 101: A Guide for Parents:** A comprehensive, research-based guide to help families understand how children learn to read and how to support them at home.

- **Ready to Read: Literacy Resources for Families:** A collection of simple tips, activities, and videos to help parents build early literacy skills in everyday moments.

- **DayByDay NY Family Literacy Calendar:** A daily calendar of literacy-building songs, stories, and activities for families to enjoy together at home.

- **New York State Library General Early Literacy Resources:** Provides statewide tools and recommended practices to promote literacy development from birth through early elementary.

- **Reach Out and Read Parents/Caregivers Resources:** Supports families with guidance and book recommendations from pediatricians to encourage reading from infancy.

Reading & Writing At Home

- **Getting Ready for School: Reading with Your Child:** Offers age-appropriate strategies to help families read aloud and support comprehension.

- **Getting Ready for School: Writing with Your Child Everyday:** Encourages families to build writing habits through everyday tasks like making lists, writing notes, and telling stories.

Digital Literacy Tools

- **Free Online Tutoring and More with Brainfuse:** Get free online homework help from one-on-one tutors, daily from 2–11 PM. Available in English, Spanish, and French, from early elementary through high school.grades, in core subject areas. Video content and other resources are also available 24 hours a day. (En español | En français).

- **Citywide Digital Library on Sora:** a digital library of eBooks, read alongs, magazines, and audiobooks with over 50K titles available for free. Curated collections include independent reading materials, as well as titles aligned with NYCPS initiatives such as NYC Reads, Hidden Voices, and Phonics and Decodables. Public library cards can also be added to Sora, giving users access to their public library collections.

- **NOVELny Databases:** suite of research databases, including free access to Encyclopedia Britannica, Gale databases, Britannica Escolar, and others.

Elementary School

- **NYC Reads:** Games and Puzzles

- **Khan Academy Kids:** Educational program for children ages two to eight.

- **PBS Kids:** Simple, themed literacy activities using PBS Kids videos and characters.

- **Starfall:** Interactive literacy games for PreK–2nd grade: phonics, vocabulary, and beginner reading.

Middle School

- **The Young Writers Project:** Creative writing prompts. Encourage journals, poetry, or performance-based storytelling.

Family Communication

OST providers can use NYC Reads family communications to stay aligned with the language and priorities schools are sharing, reinforcing key literacy messages through their own trusted relationships with families. Rather than distributing or explaining curriculum-specific materials on behalf of schools, providers should reference these resources to inform and strengthen their own family engagement.

OST providers can:

- Ask school partners what is being shared with families and when (e.g., NYC Reads updates, curriculum night materials, etc.).

- Reference the shared vocabulary or themes in their own newsletters or family events to ensure coherence and consistency.

- Use the Family Letter in this toolkit to frame the OST program's own approach to literacy—how the program aligns with NYC Reads goals, what families can expect, and how they can support reading at home.

- Encourage two-way communication by inviting families to share what they're hearing from schools and reflect on their child's literacy progress across settings.

Family Letter (available in 11 languages)

This sample family letter can be distributed by OST providers and/or schools before school breaks (e.g., summer, winter, or spring vacations). It offers families simple, joyful, and practical ideas to support their child's reading development at home.

How to use it:

- Print and distribute the letter at family events or before the last day of programming.

- Email it to families with links to digital reading resources and community library access.

- Adapt the template to include your program's upcoming events, reading challenges, or local opportunities (e.g., free museum days, public library programming, or book giveaways).

- Share in partnership with the school's own family-facing communications to build a consistent message across home, school, and OST.

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Literacy in Action:
Stories from NYC OST Programs

These real-world snapshots spotlight how you and your school partners across NYC can work together to support students' literacy journeys. From community book clubs to shared curriculum strategies and joyful art-infused learning, each vignette shows what's possible when OST programs and schools align around a shared vision: helping every child become a confident, capable reader. Whether you're designing programming, leading a team, or collaborating with educators, these stories offer practical, inspiring ideas to bring literacy to life across the full day.

Reading Together, Rooted in Community

The Esperanza Rising Book Club began during the COVID-19 pandemic with a simple idea: create a space for parents and children to read together while schools were closed. What started virtually has continued and grown, and now brings families together on a regular basis.

It has become a cornerstone of District 1's approach to extending literacy beyond the school day.

The club connects directly to classroom learning. For example, a recent club focused on "Esperanza Rising", part of the 5th grade curriculum. The book is made available to families in both English and Spanish through Sora. Parents and children bring objects that connect to the novel's themes of identity and resilience, linking their own experiences to what students encounter in class. The Tenement Museum has been a key partner, helping families share migration stories and culminating in the museum's Your Story, Our Story project.

Over four years, the club has grown from discussion to a base for broader initiatives. Parent Coordinators are now creating school-based book clubs to expand access to the book club experience, while Essex Market serves as a hub for literacy activities, distributing thousands of donated books and hosting family events. These experiences reinforce District 1's ethos: "This city is your city."

And from that foundation, new extensions continue to emerge. Parents step into leadership roles, co-designing poetry slams, heritage projects, and family story-sharing. Children see their knowledge and creativity reflected in community spaces, while parents find their voices as organizers and educators.

Together, these efforts make literacy a shared experience, giving families a window into what their children are reading in school and strengthening their participation in—and trust of—the education system.

Key Takeaways

Use texts that are part of the shared curriculum: Families read *Esperanza Rising* in English and Spanish, aligning directly with a book read as part of the school's curriculum.

Partner with local cultural resources: Partnership with the Tenement Museum linked family stories, a local museum, and the book students were reading in school.

Create physical spaces for the literacy community to come alive: Essex Market provides a permanent hub for meetings, events, and book distribution.

One Curriculum, One Team:
PS 16 & Community School Partnership

At PS 16 in District 11, Principal Latanya Gray has worked to ensure that literacy instruction extends seamlessly from classrooms into afterschool spaces. When the school joined the Next Generation Community Schools pilot, the opportunity was clear: build true coherence so that the learning day doesn't end with dismissal.

The shift started with the curriculum. PS 16 adopted EL Education to create consistency in how students encountered reading. From there, Gray and her team invited the Community School Director into instructional decision-making, joining leadership meetings, data reviews, and classroom walkthroughs, with a goal of integrating school day instruction and out-of-school-time programming. Together, they identified gaps and responded with concrete, bite-sized practices. For example, when the team saw an opportunity to encourage more student discussion, both school staff and afterschool counselors explored structured discussion protocols. This created more space for students to share their thinking and engage in academic conversations across both the school day and out-of-school time.

Professional learning stretched across boundaries. Coaches trained both educators and afterschool staff, while targeted support was provided in early literacy by an outside expert. Then a new layer was added: Read Alliance high school tutors. These older peers not only delivered reading support but also shifted younger students' attendance and motivation.

And these strategies are working. Last year, PS 16 saw a 12% increase in literacy proficiency, the largest gain since Gray's arrival—a signal that coherence across the day is paying off.

Key Takeaways

Introduce school day habits and routines into afterschool: Adoption of EL, and systemic early literacy curriculum, ensured coherent instruction during the day; afterschool staff reinforced routines like discussion protocols and small-group reading.

Give afterschool leadership a window into the school day experience: The Community School Director became embedded in instructional walks, data meetings, and decision-making, making afterschool a true extension of the school day.

Spread the training to afterschool staff: Joint training was provided for teachers and afterschool staff, while Read Alliance trained high school students to serve as literacy tutors.

Scaling Alignment with Heart:
NIA Community Services Network

NIA Community Services Network is one of New York City's largest afterschool providers, operating more than 40 sites across Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island and employing close to 800 staff. With that scale, NIA serves thousands of students each day and plays a central role in extending the school day across the city.

Literacy has long been at the heart of NIA's programming. When NYC Reads launched, NIA became an early partner in aligning school-day and afterschool learning experiences. NIA staff attended NYCPS trainings alongside day school teachers, and the education team created a tiered training structure that funneled this knowledge to site directors, line staff, and education specialists across the organization.

The result is a consistent system that maintains fidelity to school-day learning while maintaining the unique identity of afterschool. Afterschool at NIA is not more school. Alignment includes using shared vocabulary, themes, and pacing while delivering them in ways that are creative, play-based, and engaging. For example, when students choose independent reading books, options are selected to match the topic or genre from the school-day pacing guide. Vocabulary from the curriculum is curated and shared with afterschool staff so they can emphasize key vocabulary during STEM and art activities. Alignment even includes thoughtfully choosing where students spend afterschool time. Homework support takes place in grade-level classrooms, so students see the same charts, word walls, and pacing they encounter during the day.

Standardized curriculum has been especially valuable for NIA, creating more consistency in afterschool homework support across classrooms and schools. Previously, homework varied widely across classrooms and schools, which made afterschool support inconsistent. With shared materials and aligned expectations, NIA can train hundreds of staff at once, monitor fidelity across sites, and ensure families experience coherence. This consistency allows afterschool staff to focus on mastering the key concepts

students are working on—building supportive environments where children feel confident and successful.

NIA extends this focus beyond homework. High-interest texts, author visits, literacy and math game nights, and organizational-wide events ensure that every site has the tools to make reading and learning meaningful. Through a long-standing partnership with Scholastic, NIA distributes more than 10,000 books each year so that students take their learning home.

By embracing alignment while protecting the unique spirit of afterschool, NIA has created a model where consistency and creativity reinforce one another. The organization demonstrates how a community-based provider can operate at scale, partnering with schools to advance academic goals while giving students space to discover the joy of learning in their own way.

Key Takeaways

Use standardized curriculum to standardize training and expectations for afterschool staff: Most NIA schools were using the same curriculum, which meant afterschool staff could familiarize themselves with one set of materials when supporting students.

Lean into the unique strengths of afterschool: NIA is not trying to duplicate the in school experience for students. Instead they focus on high-interest texts, author visits and games to encourage the joy of reading.

Attend and spread NYCPS training: By sending representatives to NYCPS trainings, NIA can then spread training to their staff through their existing training schedule.

Different Roles, Same Goals:
MS 126 & St. Nicks Alliance

At MS 126, collaboration is the foundation of student success. Principal Timothy Goettelmann, Community School Director Bruce Prescod, and Beacon Director Stacy Diaz (St. Nicks Alliance) have built a model where in-school and after-school are not two separate worlds—they are one continuous experience for students.

The school's vision goes beyond the "whole child" to a "whole family" approach, supporting every aspect of a student's day while engaging families as partners. This shows up in aligned goals, shared resources, and a commitment to treating the building as a true community hub. One of the school's core goals is to increase student participation in after-school programming as a strategy for raising achievement. Leaders believe that consistent engagement beyond the school day strengthens literacy, builds critical thinking, and connects families more deeply to the school.

A key feature is the streamlined integration of school-day with after-school programming. A student can move from extra academic support to arts, sports, or enrichment without barriers. After-school literacy sessions, offered twice a week, are supported by St. Nicks' curriculum writers and coaches and align directly with the school's ELA pacing guide. This ensures students practice the same skills in multiple settings, while still experiencing literacy in a way that feels more playful and community-driven during after school. Family literacy nights, book giveaways, and a mobile library expand this culture of reading.

Logistics play a big role in making this partnership real. Instead of running separate planning structures, the school and its partners merged meetings so goals and decisions are shared. Prescod and Diaz participate in weekly cabinet meetings with the principal, and quarterly collaborative planning sessions align goals into one set of priorities. Teachers and after-school staff coordinate around lesson planning, space use, and student needs. Afterschool group leaders receive regular training in facilitation, and literacy coaches provide feedback on how to adapt instructional practices for after-school settings. Goals are at the top of every agenda to keep the teams centered on their shared purpose. "Different roles, same goals," is how the team describes it.

Importantly, the team balances continuity with difference. Goettelmann notes that after-school cannot feel like "an eight-hour school day." Students practice discussion, collaboration, and critical thinking in after-school, but in ways that are less formal and more student-driven. Snack time might double as an opportunity for conversation and community-building. Activities like chess, arts, or sports are designed to spark joy while still reinforcing skills like problem-solving, reading, and writing. As Diaz put it, "Even in something like playing chess, kids are still reading, writing, and thinking".

The results of this approach show up in both student achievement and community culture. More students are enrolling and staying in after-school, which leaders see as directly tied to stronger literacy outcomes and greater family engagement. Events like Domino Night, where hundreds of families gather to eat, play, and connect, embody the community-wide impact of this collaboration. New initiatives such as the Junior STEAM Academy for younger students are helping bring future families into the fold, strengthening both enrollment and long-term community ties.

The lesson from MS 126 is clear: when schools and community partners act as one team, sharing goals, logistics, and trust, students not only improve academically but also thrive socially and emotionally within a unified ecosystem of support.

Key Takeaways

Different roles, same goals: Setting a goal to increase engagement in afterschool serves both the afterschool program, which is now serving more students, and in school, students who attend afterschool perform better academically.

Build an environment that enables collaboration: Merge duplicative meetings into a single weekly cabinet meeting, invite afterschool leaders in the room for instructional conversations, and make space, materials, and computer labs equally accessible to both teams.

Achieve balance between afterschool and in school: The principal does not try to push academics into afterschool, and instead focus on making literacy come alive within the activities students are choosing to participate in.

One Continuous Learning Day: PS 189, Read Alliance, New York Edge

At PS 189, the strength of the literacy work lies in how tightly the in-school and after-school partners stay connected. The school has built a rhythm of collaboration across Read Alliance tutors, New York Edge staff, and in-school educators that ensures students experience consistency from school arrival through dismissal and into afterschool programming. This balance is deliberate: students flow seamlessly from snack time with New York Edge into small-group literacy sessions with trained high school tutors, supervised by licensed teachers and supported by the instructional coach.

The collaboration extends beyond logistics. Teachers and administrators observe Read Alliance assessments, debrief progress monitoring, and provide feedback that shapes how the tutoring program is run. This keeps everyone—school staff, tutors, and program leads—aligned around the same students and goals. Parents are also engaged, with workshops that occur at dismissal times so families can learn the strategies used in school and after school. Training and professional development are constant: for example, last summer every K–2 teacher attended district-led science of reading workshops; paraprofessionals are registered for literacy PD; and after-school staff receive orientation from the principal on the digital platforms (Lexia, iReady) that students use.

The result is a school culture where partnerships are not add-ons, but embedded in the daily life of the building. Students benefit from one-on-one tutoring, mentoring from older peers, consistent skill-building across contexts, and a consistent message that their growth is supported by a whole team of adults working in sync. The payoff has been clear: PS 189 has seen steady gains in early literacy, with kindergarten proficiency rising from 40% to 60% and first grade from 30% to 45%.

Key Takeaways

Everyone is trained for what they are asked to do: Teachers, paras and afterschool staff are all asked to play a role in building literacy among students, and each receives training appropriate to their role.

School staff play an active role in afterschool: While the tutors are high school students, they are overseen by teachers and the instructional coach.

Seamless experiences for students: The school focuses less on who is supposed to be in which program and more on ensuring a well coordinated experience from school, to afterschool, to the additional supports as needed.

Culture, Language, and Literacy Together: Coalition for Hispanic Family Services

Across Brooklyn and Queens, the Coalition for Hispanic Family Services' Arts and Literacy Program partners with schools to strengthen literacy through creativity, language, and community. More than 85 percent of staff are multilingual, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the students and families they serve, many of whom speak Spanish, Haitian Creole, Bengali, and other languages. Through artmaking, lyric writing, cooking, and other activities, the coalition helps students expand their vocabulary, background knowledge, confidence, and love of reading while honoring the languages and identities they bring to school each day.

Building and maintaining relationships with school staff is central to this work. Site directors and teaching artists employ a variety of strategies to connect with principals, teachers, and school teams. They make themselves visible by attending morning events and PTA meetings, and by inviting school leaders to afterschool showcases and family art nights where students' projects come to life. They also establish low-lift communication routines that make coordination feasible within busy schedules – whether by holding quick fifteen-minute check-ins with ELA leads,

waiting outside a principal's office to catch a few minutes between meetings, or identifying a liaison who can serve as a consistent point of contact. These intentional, relationship-centered practices help ensure that collaboration isn't an added burden but a natural part of how the program and schools work together.

District-level collaboration is also beginning to take shape. In response to lower-than-expected student outcomes on early-year literacy benchmarks, the superintendent in District 32 recently convened community-based organizations to explore new opportunities for partnership around NYC Reads. Coalition leaders joined these meetings to review data, learn about the district's curriculum focus, and begin identifying shared strategies to strengthen alignment between school-day and afterschool literacy supports. This growing exchange of information helps afterschool teams understand what students are working on during the day and adjust their own enrichment activities accordingly. For example, connecting an afterschool music project to the themes of a novel students are reading, or exploring vocabulary and storytelling through a family cooking class.

Looking ahead, the coalition hopes to strengthen professional development opportunities for afterschool educators. Many staff are early in their careers or working toward certification, and leaders see ongoing training, especially around the Science of Reading and NYC Reads curricula, as a way to build both instructional alignment and staff confidence. By investing in staff learning, the coalition aims to sustain and deepen its partnerships with schools, ensuring that afterschool remains a connected and integral part of students' literacy journeys.

Key Takeaways

Relationships are the foundation of alignment: Intentional, consistent efforts to build trust with school staff make collaboration sustainable, including a focus on making communication as low-lift as possible.

Cultural and linguistic diversity are assets: Multilingual staff and arts-based activities give students learning English multiple access points to engage with learning in a comfortable environment.

District partnerships create new openings: When superintendents include afterschool providers in planning and data discussions, it helps providers understand school priorities and affirms their role as partners in student learning.

Low-Lift Strategies, High-Impact Results: PS 134 & Henry Street Settlement

At PS 134 on the Lower East Side, Principal Robert Perales and the Henry Street Settlement team have built an after-school partnership that keeps literacy authentic and achievable. Their collaboration shows how even with limited time and resources, coherence between school and after-school can deepen students' connection to reading without turning the day into nine-hour academic marathons.

When NYC Reads rolled out, PS 134 was already ahead of the curve. The school had moved away from balanced literacy years earlier, adopting Into Reading and then transitioning to EL Education, ensuring students engaged deeply with grade-level texts. As Perales explains, "We saw the writing on the wall. Students needed to decode, not just guess what sounded right." This mindset led to schoolwide conversations about the "five pillars of literacy" and how they could show up beyond the classroom.

Together with the Henry Street after-school director, Perales used the 5-Step Collaboration Protocol to ground their planning. They identified two focus areas drawn from the five pillars, vocabulary and fluency, as entry points for after-school alignment. Staff, many of whom are young adults new to education, were given practical, easy-to-learn tools: the Frayer Model for vocabulary and choral and echo reading for fluency. These strategies link directly to what students practice during the day and can be modeled for inexperienced staff in under ten minutes. "The beauty is that it's low-lift but high-impact," Perales said.

The after-school team now integrates vocabulary from EL modules into read-alouds, discussions, and projects. Texts are chosen to echo school themes, helping students encounter the same ideas in new, joyful contexts. Over time, these moments strengthen comprehension while keeping learning playful and authentic.

Perales emphasizes balance: "Only about 15 to 20 percent of after-school is direct literacy work, and that's the way it should be. The rest is arts, movement, joy." This joy-filled time isn't separate from literacy—it strengthens it. Indirect literacy activities like music, art, movement, and conversation build vocabulary, background knowledge, and engagement, reinforcing the direct instruction students receive during both the school day and after-school.

Even beyond instruction, alignment extends to shared goals. Henry Street staff participate in PS 134's weekly attendance meetings, serving as "success mentors" who connect with families to reduce absenteeism, a simple but powerful lever for literacy growth. "If students are here, they're learning," Perales said. The collaboration on reducing absenteeism builds a trusting, working relationship, and accentuates some of the afterschool's strengths.

The partnership between PS 134 and Henry Street Settlement shows that literacy alignment isn't built through mandates, but through trust. By keeping strategies simple, and experiences joyful, they're building a model that lasts because it works for both children and adults.

Key Takeaways

Use the tools to start the conversation: Use the collaboration protocol to build trust and shared ownership between school leaders and CBO directors.

Start small: Focus on one or two literacy pillars that after-school staff can easily implement (for example, vocabulary and fluency).

Keep it joyful: Literacy alignment should enhance, not extend, the school day.

Leverage attendance partnerships: After-school staff are often already powerful allies in reducing absenteeism. Use this as an entry point for literacy partnership.