

Background

The Baltimore Library Project is a public-philanthropic partnership of The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Baltimore City Public Schools, and more than 30 community and government partners. The Library Project works “to build or transform Baltimore City Public School libraries in neighborhoods where many students face academic and economic challenges.” Since its inception in 2011, the Library Project has renovated 17 elementary and middle school libraries. The Weinberg Foundation has committed \$15 million to this initiative. By 2024, the Library Project anticipates serving 9,000 students, as well as their families, through 19 new libraries and will have leveraged more than \$30 million in additional federal, state, and local funds.

The Library Project began with a shared vision between the Weinberg Foundation and City Schools. This vision was informed by conversations with educational leaders in Baltimore City, studying library renovation initiatives in other parts of the country, reviewing empirical research about the relationship between strong school libraries and student achievement, and a fundamental belief that all children deserve well-equipped, well-resourced, and well-staffed libraries.

The Weinberg Foundation supports up to 30% of the total costs of each new library. Although many factors are involved in the selection of schools that receive a Baltimore Library Project renovation, a major factor has become whether the school is already receiving capital improvement project funding for multisystems projects. In the Baltimore Library Project, City Schools has the responsibility of identifying which schools could potentially become Baltimore Library Project schools.

Other factors that were important to school selection included whether the school had:

- A principal who was active, engaged, and supportive of library activities
- A librarian on staff or a willingness to hire a librarian
- An engaged school community that will use the library
- Sufficient enrollment to absorb the added library staffing costs
- Any enrollment projections that might indicate that the school might be closed in the near future
- Any plans for a full-school renovation that could impact a renovated library

Evaluation Methods

In Fall 2021, the Weinberg Foundation and City Schools began a partnership with an evaluation firm, Sharp Insight, LLC, to evaluate 1) the implementation of school library best practices within; 2) the impact of; and 3) the funding and partnership mechanisms used for the 15 renovated libraries opened between 2011 and 2019:

- Arlington Elementary/Middle School
- The Commodore John Rodgers School
- Elmer A. Henderson: A Johns Hopkins Partnership School
- George Washington Elementary School
- Francis Scott Key Elementary/Middle School
- Hampden Elementary/Middle School
- Harford Heights Elementary School
- The Historic Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School
- James McHenry Elementary/Middle School
- Moravia Park Elementary School
- Morrell Park Elementary/Middle School
- Southwest Baltimore Charter School
- Thomas Johnson Elementary/Middle School
- Westport Academy Elementary School
- Windsor Hills Elementary/Middle School

This evaluation of the Baltimore Library Project included two separate but related studies, each with its own primary areas of focus: Study 1 used Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) data, key informant interviews, and library site visits to assess the implementation of school library best practices. Using key informant interviews, Study 2 explored the unique funding and partnership mechanisms used to support the Library Project. These studies were guided by evaluation objectives that sought to determine the Library Project’s:

- Unique characteristics
- Impact on students and capital improvements
- Strengths
- Challenges and limitations
- COVID-19 and virtual/hybrid education
- Lessons learned and recommendations
- Sustainability
- Opportunities for scaling and replication

Synthesized Key Findings



The Baltimore Library Project is a successful public-philanthropic partnership. Partners highlighted the active engagement of the Weinberg Foundation in all aspects of the project as well as the strong working relationship that partners have developed with each other. Factors attributed to success included the vision and leadership guiding the partnership as well as the ongoing commitment and collaboration between partners.



The Baltimore Library Project is making a positive contribution to schools. Administrators noted how having a renovated library is connected to increases in enrollment at their schools. Based on both quantitative analysis and semi-structured interviews, Library Project libraries are associated with positive school climate and may be making a difference in student academic performance.



Public schools could always use additional financial and personnel resources. There was broad agreement that support from the Weinberg Foundation is generous. Even so, some noted uncertainty around the timing and amount of available funds. This, paired with the fact that many libraries are going without the expected yearly funds from their school and/or the district, left many librarians in Library Project schools wishing that they had more funding for collections maintenance.



Staffing school libraries is critical, yet complex. Library Project schools having a full-time, certified librarian and support staff aligns with best practices from the extant literature on school libraries. However, certified librarians are not always effective schoolteachers. Given the limited hiring pool and salary costs, hiring certified librarians – even with support from the Weinberg Foundation, can come at the cost of another resource (e.g., art, music, gym).



Library access is influenced by scheduling and staffing. Students' ability to check out books is related to when and how often library class is scheduled and whether before and after school hours are offered.



COVID-19 exposed or exacerbated challenges with library-based community and family engagement. The partnerships that the Foundation brings to schools often supplement library instructional time, but they are also an important part of how libraries engage with families and the larger community. Unfortunately, once school buildings closed due to COVID, many of these partnerships faded away.



Even with actively committed Baltimore Library Project partners, sustainability remains a challenge. Interviewees identified limited availability of funds for construction, operations, collections, staffing, and maintenance of the physical space as key factors in the sustainability of the project. Interviewees also recognized the importance of high-level leadership commitment and the successful collaborative model that has developed as a key factor in sustainability of the project.

Recommendations

Continue Dialogue Regarding Long-Term Strategies: Multiple partners identified a need to reconvene all those involved in the Library Project – Weinberg Foundation, City Schools, and community and governmental partners – together for general status updates as well as discussions about what is working well, what could be improved, and sustainability of the project.

Institutionalize Library Project Processes: Ensuring continuity through personnel changes and increased transparency around processes, including school selection criteria, are important parts of ensuring the continued success of the Library Project.

Continue to Elevate the Critical Role of Librarians in Library Success: Baltimore Library Project Partners have an opportunity to collaboratively address the shortage of certified school librarians in Baltimore City.

Revisit the Standard Components of Renovated Libraries: There are opportunities to examine the features of renovated libraries on a school-by-school basis to ensure that they meet the needs of each school community.