



2021 SELECT Report

A collaborative conversation for Tennessee's early literacy leaders to explore, learn, and connect around a shared vision to build a brighter future for children

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From the President's Desk

Governor's Early Literacy Foundation's vision for the Statewide Early Literacy Education Convening of Tennessee (SELECT) began to take form in 2019. In an effort to better understand the literacy landscape in Tennessee, I traveled across the state to meet with early literacy stakeholders who were doing innovative and meaningful work in their communities. There were five major regional efforts across the state leading the charge. During conversations with these leaders, I asked each organization if they had connected with the other regional efforts. They had not. Not for lack of desire, but often the capacity, time, and energy being used in their own literacy efforts did not afford meeting.

We at Governor's Early Literacy Foundation saw an opportunity to change this. Bringing together groups comprised of amazing literacy professionals working arduously to move the needle for early literacy would accelerate positive change. This is the foundation upon which the concept of SELECT was built, ultimately becoming a convening in which regional early literacy leaders would meet with other professionals from across Tennessee to discuss how they are approaching early literacy – what's working, what's not working, what success looks like, and how we can get there together.

In September 2021, this convening became a reality. Fifteen people representing their regional early literacy efforts joined us in Nashville for a facilitated day of conversation and learning. We built relationships, developed a shared understanding of each other's challenges and opportunities, and cleared a pathway forward for us to collectively create a vision for early literacy efforts in Tennessee.

We appreciate all who took the time to participate and support this effort and look forward to more convenings and progress in early literacy for Tennessee's children.

Sincerely,



James Pond

President, Governor's Early Literacy Foundation



LEADING THE CHARGE:

Chattanooga 2.0, First 8 Memphis, the Knox Education Foundation, Nashville Blueprint, and a collaborative in Northeast Tennessee with Ballad Health, the Niswonger Foundation, and East Tennessee State University

Contents

Summary 4-5

- Participants
- Discoveries
- Key Action Items

Key Conversational Goals6-7

- Focus
- Understanding
- Alignment

Emerging Themes & Values.....8-11

- Connections
- Community
- Shared Purpose

Regional Programs & Strategies..... 10-15

The Outcome 16-19

- Summary of Ideas
- Participant Survey Results
- Next Steps

Meet the Class of Fall 2021 Back Cover



Summary

This report details the activities and results of the first Statewide Early Literacy Education Convening of Tennessee (SELECT) meeting. Through SELECT, Governor's Early Literacy Foundation (GELF) brings together early literacy leaders from across the state to build connections and a shared understanding of current initiatives and future opportunities through meaningful dialogue. The purpose of SELECT is to create a collaborative statewide vision for early literacy efforts in Tennessee.

PARTICIPANTS

The first SELECT meeting was held in Nashville in September 2021 and included early literacy leaders from five prominent regions – Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, Nashville, and Northeast Tennessee. Participants spent a day in deep discussion about the early literacy efforts in their regions, how to best leverage the successes and lessons learned by fellow organizations, and next steps for building a statewide early literacy action plan.

Fifteen leaders from 13 organizations came together for a collaborative conversation to explore, learn, and connect around a shared early literacy vision. Though working in largely the same field and on the same issues, these groups had never before assembled as a group to share their work, ideas, or challenges. This presented an opportunity for Governor's Early Literacy Foundation (GELF), as an independent, statewide entity, to bring together these stakeholders in an effort to establish a shared vision for early literacy in Tennessee.



DISCOVERIES

- There are diverse and dynamic early literacy programs across the state.
- There is a pervasive need for community support and engagement in early literacy.
- Finding better ways to engage with caregivers is critical and a top priority across the state.
- Greater connections to childcare and school districts are needed by all.
- Collaboration among the regions can build everyone's capacity.
- There is great opportunity for expansion of early literacy efforts in Tennessee.
- SELECT should continue and GELF is well positioned to shepherd the effort.

KEY ACTION ITEMS

During SELECT, the group determined that a shared action plan would help outline challenges, identify priority next steps to align their work together and drive solutions that strengthen early literacy statewide.

- Define and adopt the same early literacy terms and vocabulary.
- Develop early literacy milestones and share data to create a meaningful benchmarking tool.
- Create a coordinated, statewide early literacy communications and public relations plan, resulting in: greater public awareness and support, corporate investment, and local advocacy.
- Share and promote resources and strategies to strengthen the early literacy landscape.
- Have a shared definition of what success looks like.

Further information about this first SELECT meeting is detailed in the following narrative. We at Governor's Early Literacy Foundation (GELF) hope you enjoy and are inspired by this SELECT report. We believe it exemplifies the power of collaboration and the vital importance of early literacy work in Tennessee.

Key Conversational Goals

The SELECT meeting was divided into three sections that centered on key goals among participants.

1. Focus
2. Understanding
3. Alignment

FOCUS

Establish a shared vision and connect for a larger purpose.

At the outset, each participant spent time sharing information about specific programs, initiatives, and strategic priorities within their own regions. This helped the group begin to collectively think, envision, trust, and connect for a larger purpose.

As each region shared their **focus** with the group, participants examined deeper assumptions and themes within the field of early literacy. Birth to 3 years, PreK, equity, and access within early literacy were common themes of each regional focus. The more participants shared their thoughts, knowledge, and experience with one another, the more passion and commitment surfaced as to why the work in early literacy is so vital to our society.

Ideas emerged such as “A child cannot love to read if they do not know how to do it” or “Working to build a culture of ‘early’ is important.”

During focus, participants discussed the importance of breaking down barriers and providing more access to professional development for early childhood educators and caregivers. Community support was raised as an essential element of early literacy, revealing a strong desire among participants to increase community engagement in early literacy work.

“A child cannot love to read if they do not know how to do it.”

UNDERSTANDING

Build a greater knowledge of the early literacy landscape and peer efforts.

The time of **focus** led participants to discover their shared perspectives and unique challenges, building an energy of camaraderie and leading to a greater **understanding** of the various efforts among the regions.

Participants from each regional effort shared their early literacy initiatives, goals, and key partnerships with the group, giving a broader **understanding** of what work was being done statewide. Equipped with this better **understanding** of Tennessee's varied early literacy efforts, the group explored opportunities for shared resources and program alignment across regions. They collectively agreed that establishing a community of professionals with a variety of experiences and resources could benefit all. Conversations focused on building shared capacity and strengthening connections with childcare providers and school districts, with an emphasis on reaching early literacy milestones.

ALIGNMENT

Work together to create solutions and cast the vision.

After deeper understanding was established, participants discussed how to **align** efforts and continue to build on the progress made through SELECT. The group expressed that the highlight of the convening was the sense of connection, community, and shared purpose among participants and the efforts they represented. Conversations centered around sharing resources, creating collective milestones, and continuing SELECT to encourage focus, understanding, and alignment around a statewide vision for early literacy in Tennessee.

“Working to build a culture of ‘early’ is important.”

Emerging Themes & Values

The conversations and activities at SELECT revealed three emerging themes of importance among the early literacy stakeholders.

1. Connections
2. Community
3. Shared Purpose

CONNECTIONS

Learn and share with peers to discover what's working.

One of SELECT's primary goals was to build **connections** among early literacy efforts across the state. This goal was achieved, as participants expressed their delight in making **connections** with one another throughout the convening. Participant surveys reflected how much the participants enjoyed hearing about the work being done in other regions and developing contacts that can become part of their networking beyond SELECT.

During the convening, participants were highly engaged and talked about how the event was energizing and gave them a sense that they are not alone in their efforts. Discussions centered on how the regions could support each other, offer advice, and share best practices regarding what is working and what is not within their respective regions. Participants expressed the desire for more SELECT gatherings to strengthen these **connections**, help them learn more about different programming, generate ideas to present to their own regions, and discover common trends in programming that could reinforce early literacy efforts statewide.

The exposure to programs and strategic initiatives taking place in different regions demonstrated to the participants that there is a great opportunity to leverage each other's efforts and knowledge to positively influence early literacy across the state.



COMMUNITY

Form a statewide community that helps to align the early literacy landscape.



Community was another emerging theme that became central to SELECT. The groups immediately began to share who they were and how they are currently influencing early literacy in their communities. At the beginning of the convening, there was a sense that participants would just stay within their own groups, but as they began hearing from other participants, that sense shifted. Participants started mingling, and conversation expanded to discovering how the various groups could work together on potential projects and support one another through common challenges.

The group also collaborated to create an asset map that visually demonstrated the early literacy work being done in each of the represented regions across the state. This activity greatly promoted a **community** mindset. (For more information on regional efforts and the asset map, see **Regional Programs & Strategies**.) The more the group examined and discussed the various early literacy efforts, the more they realized how essential it is to work together.

Participants expressed a strong desire to learn about and contribute to the big picture of early literacy in Tennessee and beyond. As each region shared what they were focused on and how they were advancing early literacy within their region, there was an equal desire to learn about each other and identify similarities and differences among the initiatives. Throughout the conversations and activities, participants discussed how they appreciated the opportunity to be together, as it gave them a feeling of being a part of something bigger than themselves.

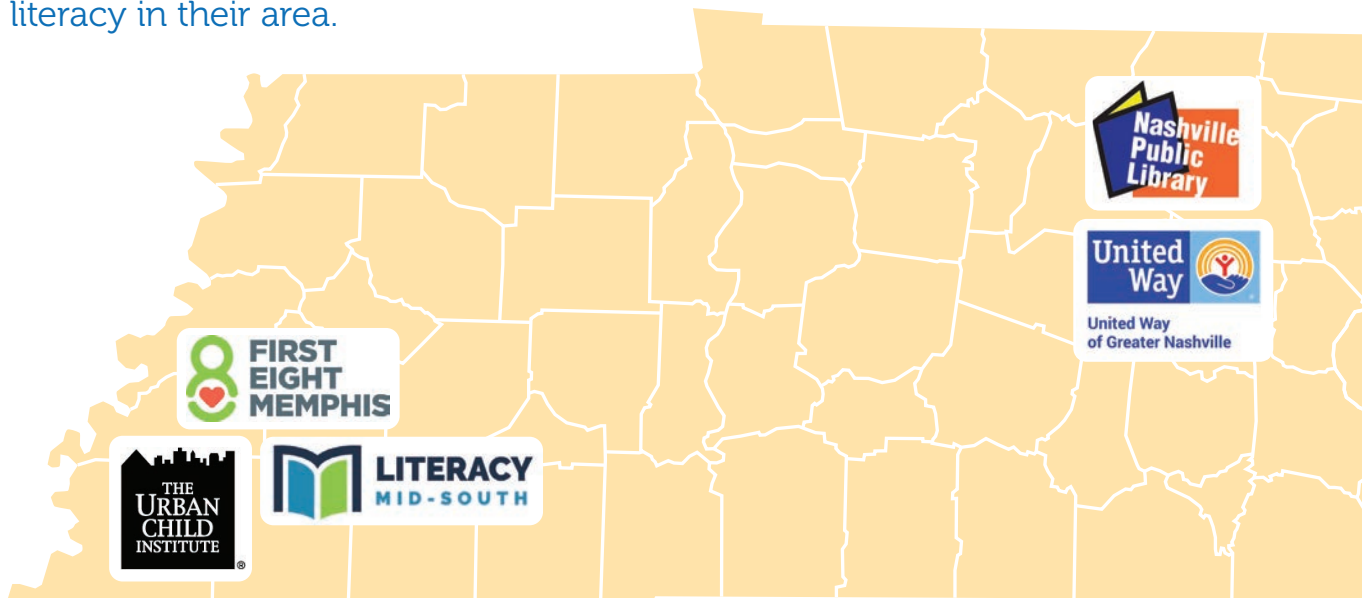
COMMUNITY (cont.)

Discussions also revealed an opportunity for Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation (GELF) to assist in the formation of a statewide **community** that would bring continuity and longevity to the state’s early literacy efforts. This statewide **community** would benefit each region, as well as GELF, as it would raise awareness and bring attention to the mission-critical work within all early literacy efforts across the state. As one participant stated in their evaluation, “the greatest gift that Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation can provide is a unifying voice for the needs across the state.” For GELF to provide such a voice, it was recommended that further SELECT convenings be called to build a collective and **community**-centered approach to early literacy in Tennessee.

“the greatest gift that Governor’s
Early Literacy Foundation can provide
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across the state.”

Regional Programs & Strategies

A key objective of SELECT was giving each region an opportunity to share information about some of the work they are doing to promote and advance early literacy in their area.



SHARED PURPOSE

Continue collaboration to drive action and impact together.

One of the areas of focus during the convening was that of alignment. Participants began to uncover how their work was connected to the work of others throughout the state and their **shared purpose** began to emerge. This is particularly important because recognizing a **shared purpose** can be difficult when organizations are not interconnected. Organizations often employ different strategies and measure distinct goals when trying to advance results. Because of this, at a quick glance, it can appear that organizations are pursuing specialized objectives. However, the various groups initiated more in-depth discussions around issues and challenges and quickly saw they were all trying to reach the same goal: to increase early literacy to improve the lives of children and families.

The regions were interested in greater cross-regional communication – an area where they felt GELF could assist. Participants were highly interested in more SELECT convenings to strengthen connections, community, and ultimately participate in the creation of an action plan and shared messaging/storytelling for advancing early literacy in Tennessee.

This gave participants the chance to recognize commonalities, learn new approaches, and identify opportunities for collaboration.



OVERVIEW OF REGIONAL PROGRAMS

(from West to East)

Shelby: First 8 Memphis, Literacy Mid-South, and Urban Child Institute

First 8 Memphis focuses on early childhood systems, building organizations with a prenatal-8 target. The early literacy emphasis has a holistic perspective. The Shelby County Early Childhood Education Plan has been implemented through the Bright Start Network, led by the Tennesseans for Quality Early Education (TQEE).

Bright Start is a new statewide initiative, represented in each SELECT region. Each of the six regions has a dedicated fellowship program focused on how to unite the region and create a systemic approach to education throughout life, starting from birth to third grade.

Literacy Mid-South's focus is on literacy across a lifetime (birth-adults). One of the programs that helps support this focus is the Welcome Bluff City Baby program, which works with OBGYNs to provide a backpack of literacy materials to caregivers of newborns. The program distributed 20,000 literacy bags over the summer of 2021.

Shelby County Government's Office of Community Engagement and Outreach's Nonprofit Committee on Children, Youth, and Education is creating a research-based phonics A-Z book that highlights Memphis and Shelby County. There are also conversations happening around how to address adolescent literacy.

The Urban Child Institute convenes a monthly early literacy consortium of people interested in early literacy. There is a webinar series for families that is being developed in partnership with Shelby County Schools, to start fall 2021.

Nashville: Nashville Public Library and United Way of Greater Nashville

In Nashville, United Way of Greater Nashville and the Nashville Public Library are focused on identifying the drivers that put systems in place. These efforts have led them to focus on birth to age three and PreK to third grade.

United Way developed a literacy framework for the region and offered professional development for teachers to implement the new framework. They created a website designed to help families with birth to age-four information. This allowed equal access to professional development for all childcare providers and built out a PreK teacher portal EDU toolbox in partnership with Lipscomb University and the Ayers Foundation.

Blueprint for Early Childhood Success, Nashville Public Library, My Brother's Keeper, Ingram Industries, and United Way of Greater Nashville developed the Books Brothers program that included twenty-four YouTube videos featuring men of color reading stories. This program was formed in partnership with Metro Nashville Public Schools to align book selections with what kids see in the classroom and their standard curriculum. Nashville Public Library has the Summer Reading Buddies program, which has been a great way to connect summer camps and students with books, literacy resources, and the library's Summer Reading Challenge.

Hamilton: Chattanooga 2.0 and United Way of Greater Chattanooga

'Early is Important' is the mantra of Hamilton County Schools, in partnership with Chattanooga 2.0 and United Way of Greater Chattanooga. They work together to build a new culture in which the community more easily recognizes and values when learning begins. They are also actively gathering data to evaluate and research how to more effectively use "out of school" time, stating that 80% of a child's time is spent out of school. As a part of both efforts, they have led reading campaigns, and Hamilton County Schools has partnered with community organizations to offer training on foundational literacy skills. Finally, as all Tennessee schools are now required to send a letter home when children are not reading on grade level, these organizations are providing caregivers with virtual and in-person training to provide information about what these letters mean and how they can support and improve their children's literacy skills.



***Knoxville: Knox County Public Library, Knox County Schools,
and Knox Education Foundation***

The Knox County Public Library has initiated the Read City USA Program, which is committed to promoting reading and helping educators who are not trained to be reading teachers, so they can be more effective in teaching reading in the upper grades.

Knox Education Foundation brings together the Project Read Knoxville and the Great Schools Partnership. The momentum they have with donors indicates there is strong support for the efforts of the foundation. They are currently focused on figuring out how to work together and leverage resources. There is a Dyslexia Committee that is connected with Knox County Schools and additional tutoring opportunities on mornings, nights, and Saturdays.

There is a strong interest in rebuilding the assessment structure to balance accountability of implementing high-quality instructional materials, in combination with teacher morale and retention. Part of the priority is to ensure that guardians and caregivers are not left behind in being able to contribute to developing early literacy.

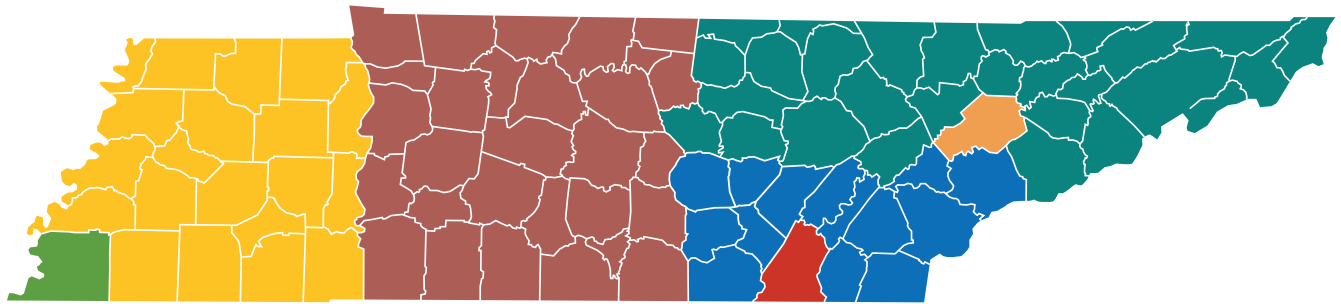
***Northeast: East Tennessee State University, Niswonger Foundation,
and STRONG Accountable Care Community***

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) has a database of students who are willing to babysit, tutor, etc. PreK-12 students. ETSU has made this database available to the community, connecting caregivers with ETSU students who are looking for those opportunities. ETSU students also created videos and supporting materials to train church members and make them more comfortable with literacy programs for kids and adults.

The Niswonger Foundation has an interest in programs for college and career readiness, encompassing an interest in early literacy. Many programs serve the nineteen school districts in the Northeast and there is diligent work happening in the rural communities.

The STRONG Accountable Care Community is focused on a collective impact coalition that began in late 2018 and adopted their strategic plan in 2020. The Community will serve twenty-one counties in Tennessee and some areas in Southwest Virginia.

The Asset Map demonstrated there are some programs that overlap across regions:



■ Shelby County ■ Middle Tennessee ■ Knox County ■ Upper East Tennessee
■ West Tennessee ■ Hamilton County ■ Southeast Tennessee

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

ALL REGIONS

- Lead high-dosage tutoring programs
- Involved with reading and literacy tracking
- Deliver books

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

HOST TRANSITION CAMPS

- STRONG Accountable Care's KinderCamp (Upper East TN)
- Niswonger Foundation (Upper East TN)
- Hamilton County's CampK (Southeast TN)

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY SKILLS TRAINING

- Knox County (East TN)
- Hamilton County (Southeast TN)

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

FAITH-BASED LITERACY PROGRAMS

- Shelby County (West TN)
- Upper East Tennessee

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

PARENTS AS TEACHERS PROGRAMS

- Shelby County (West TN)
- Knox County (East TN)

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

LITERACY ACROSS THE LIFESPAN APPROACH with Coalition, Campaign

- West Tennessee
- Shelby County (West TN)

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

LENA COLLABORATIVE, an early talk technology and data-driven national nonprofit to transform children's futures

- West Tennessee
- Shelby County (West TN)

The Outcome

SUMMARY OF IDEAS

The overall future focus identified by participants was capacity building.

Below is a summary of ideas generated:

- Establish a statewide virtual library for K-12 students, like the program hosted by the Knox Education Fund
- Create more cultural competency in children's books
- Identify more diversity in books and in staff, training, and materials
- Generate more out-of-school strategies, such as:
 - Pediatrician office networks
 - Community little libraries statewide
 - Professional development for out-of-school time providers
 - Summer program enhancements
 - Parent and caregiver education
 - Bridging the gap between PreK and Kindergarten, making the transition more seamless
 - Increasing the connection between childcare providers and school districts
- Leverage public policy locally to influence literacy
- Develop a shared vocabulary so all regions are working with the same definitions (Ex. "school readiness" or "Kindergarten readiness")
- Collaborate with universities to make excellent early childhood instructional materials more accessible
- Create a coordinated, statewide public relations/communications plan that focuses on early literacy and has shared marketing materials, etc. for all regions to use
- Seek greater corporate investment in early education
- Develop shared literacy milestones that regions can use as a benchmarking tool



“I loved hearing what groups and individuals in the other parts of the state are doing. It helped me to think of ways that we are or aren’t supporting literacy in our region. It gave me ideas of things we can or need to do. It also made me realize that in other parts of the state there is an organization that is especially the “champion” of literacy. I don’t think we have that in the 1st congressional district. We are doing things but they are disjointed rather than to achieve a common goal. I believe we are headed in that direction...as we begin to have a more focused effort. This event really inspired and invigorated me!”

— Karin Keith, East Tennessee State University

“It was helpful to see the activity going on in each section of the state. This allowed us to see what was trending and what could be replicated. It also allowed us to share and show what our successes and opportunities could be.”

— Sam O’Bryant, Literacy Mid-South

“I enjoyed learning about the different approaches to revisioning and remapping early education. I was interested in the fact that most of the organizations represented were outside the official school networks.”

— Mary-Pom Claiborne, Knox County Public Library



PARTICIPANT SURVEY RESULTS

100% of participants reported gathering with this group valuable.

83% said gathering multiple times a year would be ideal.



When answering, “How do you think Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation can best impact the early literacy landscape in Tennessee as a nonpartisan statewide literacy organization?”, participants gave feedback focused around several key words:

- Partnering
- Connections
- Communicate
- Messaging
- Networks
- Capacity-Building
- Resource-Sharing
- Innovation
- Evidence-Informed

NEXT STEPS

Governor's Early Literacy Foundation set out to host this initial convening with the sole purpose of bringing these regional efforts together, without a stated goal or agenda. After the first event, it was made clear – SELECT was valuable. There was a strong desire among the participants to reconvene in early 2022, with an expanded group of participants. Each region would like to add 5-10 additional people from different organizations working within the early literacy landscape. This will further expand the understanding of what efforts are happening, who the key stakeholders are, and how Governor's Early Literacy Foundation might help align these efforts statewide.

As next steps, GELF will follow up with current SELECT partners to:

1. Set the date and location of the first 2022 SELECT event
2. Identify additional invitees for a more robust statewide representation
3. Define collective purpose and goals to measure group progress and success
4. Establish an agenda and working groups in accordance with 2021's learning accomplishments.



Meet the Class of Fall 2021

Elizabeth Atack

*Manager, Bringing Books to Life
Nashville Public Library*

Erica Mitchell, MPP

*Executive Vice President/
Chief Community Impact Officer
United Way of Greater Nashville*

Leslie Watt

*Director of Education
United Way of Greater Nashville*

Jennifer Andrews

*Director of Early Childhood Strategies
Early Matters/Chattanooga 2.0*

Breckan Duckworth

*Literacy Officer
Hamilton County Schools*

Lesley Searce

*President & CEO
United Way of Greater Chattanooga*

Mary Pom Claiborne

*Director of Marketing, Development,
and Communications
Knox County Public Library*

Shannon Jackson

*Executive Director of Teaching
and Learning
Knox County Schools*

Chris Letsos

*Chief Executive Officer
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*Director, STRONG Accountable
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Nancy Dishner, PhD

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Urban Child Institute*

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