

Lincoln Reads Aloud: A Collective Impact Model

The proposed project builds upon momentum established through an existing community-created collective impact agenda and situates **libraries and museums (LAMs) in Lincoln, Nebraska to play a key leadership role** by collaborating to link their cultural, civic, and educational assets, within and beyond their walls, to the goal of ensuring all children are kindergarten ready by promoting reading aloud to children aged 0 – 8. This is a collaborative proposal from five Lincoln’s LAMs, submitted by Lincoln’s community foundation. The effort will have two audiences and purposes:

- 1) General population awareness and promotion
- 2) Targeted mentoring for families in a high poverty geographic area

1. Statement of Need

Reading Aloud to Young Children Is Single Most Important Activity for Building Knowledge

Reading aloud to children in early childhood (i.e., birth to eight years of age) has important and lasting impacts on child development. The landmark *Becoming a Nation of Readers* report (Commission on Reading, 1984) concluded that “the single most important activity for building knowledge for their eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (p. 23). Since that report, research has continued to expand our understanding that reading aloud builds brains (Hutton, Horowitz-Kraus, Mendelsohn, DeWitt, & Holland, 2015), word recognition (Elster, 1994) and vocabulary (Massaro, 2015), comprehension (Lane & Wright, 2007), bonding and social skills, and children who are read aloud to are more likely to be kindergarten ready (see Raikes et al., 2006). However, only one-third of parents report that their young children are engaged in reading aloud for 15 minutes daily at home (YouGov, 2016). Most surveys find lower rates of reading aloud in non-white, low-income, and low parental educational attainment households (Child Trends, 2015). The U.S. federal government has set a Healthy People 2020 initiative to increase the proportion of children who are read to by a parent every day (EMC-2.3; <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/early-and-middle-childhood/objectives>).

Lincoln’s LAMs have the skills, abilities, and standing to serve as a community focal point to achieve positive community change in reading aloud to young children. LAMs are skilled at communicating information in appealing ways and helping people gain new ideas and experiences. LAMs have the ability to reach **targeted audiences** as well as appeal to the **general public** and to elicit dialogue through perspective-taking. LAMs hold important cultural, intellectual, and physical assets, are known as safe places to explore new ideas, are respected organizations, and have already forged individual relationships with other organizations that can be leveraged for this work. Libraries, particularly, have been a natural home for an initiative promoting early reading. Lincoln City Libraries has engaged in a *Read Aloud 15 Minutes a Day* campaign since February of 2016, building upon its read aloud capacity in the last ten years (e.g. weekly library learning times for caregivers and young children, trained staff to support caregivers in reading aloud and pre-literacy, reaching families through their medical homes and childcare centers). The other LAMs participating in this proposal have also partnered with community organizations to support literacy activities. The proposed project will **expand the vision and will move from periodic organization-specific efforts to a collaborative one situated at head of a community-established collective impact agenda.**

Lincoln Has Established Early Childhood as a Collective Impact Agenda With Reading Component
In Lincoln, an agenda-setting process (*Prosper Lincoln*), founded on data (*Lincoln Vital Signs* reports), has set the stage for this project. That process identified Early Childhood as a community agenda focal areas and specifically identified supporting caregivers in reading aloud to their children as an important strategy. The **Lincoln Vital Signs** reports (lincolnvitalsigns.org), initiated by 13 of Lincoln's largest philanthropic organizations, the business community, and local government, was developed to understand the seemingly opposing local trends of low unemployment, cuts to government support, fewer local philanthropic dollars, and non-profit organizations reporting needs had never been greater. The report compiled data in seven areas: Community Profile, Economy and Workforce, Basic Needs, Education, Health, Safety, Community Involvement and Culture. The 2014 and 2015 reports identified three findings: 1) Lincoln does many things exceptionally well and these successes should be nurtured; 2) A growing proportion of Lincoln's population faces real need; and 3) In particular our children fare poorly on many measures. The community was strongly impacted by learning of the 58% increase in poverty since 2005 and that Lincoln has six neighborhoods in extreme poverty (i.e., more than 40% of the residents live in households that fall below the poverty threshold¹), while in 2000 the city had no neighborhoods in extreme poverty.

In 2015, **Prosper Lincoln** (prosperlincoln.org) was initiated to respond to the community's desire to collectively respond to the Lincoln Vital Signs reports. Prosper Lincoln was born when a group of community leaders agreed that Lincoln needed to create a shared agenda for the community and an action plan that would guide efforts to become an even more vibrant and equitable city. Three Workgroups, one for each agenda item, were formed with experts and practitioners to develop goals and objectives. The community agenda is:

- Early Childhood – Nurture every child on the path to success
- Employment Skills – Ensure access to training and support for skilled, in-demand jobs
- Innovation – Create a world class ecosystem for innovation where Lincoln is the epicenter

Within the Early Childhood agenda, **reading aloud to young children has been identified as a key strategy** that will lead to community change.

The three agenda areas are complex challenges that cannot be easily addressed by a single program, organization, or even community sector. Prosper Lincoln recognizes that and has **catalyzed action of many organizations by aligning efforts to achieve a greater impact**. It will also align efforts to create permanent, systematic change through forging new connections and processes. Prosper Lincoln, in essence, has created a civic infrastructure for community action and is attending to the hallmarks of collective impact (common agenda, aligned efforts, common measures of success).

Early Childhood Agenda Is Experiencing Momentum

Although the Early Childhood Agenda efforts officially started only seven months ago with the hiring of Michelle Suarez (a retired elementary school principal from a school located in the designated geographic area), there have already been a number of impressive achievements:

1. Oversight Committee established whose membership includes LAM representatives, child development experts, public and private school administrators, philanthropists, representatives

¹ Residents of neighborhoods in extreme poverty begin to face cultural and social constraints that isolate them from opportunities for economic advancement (Quane & Wilson, 2012; Wilson, 2010).

of low-income families, health experts, and community organizers. This committee reports to a 100-member Board of Counselors that represents all sectors named above.

2. The launch event to establish an Early Childhood Business Roundtable was conducted in partnership with Lincoln Chamber with over 100 persons in attendance.
3. Over 100 community representatives have participated in an Early Childhood System of Care Community Mapping project to identify health, family resource, and educational needs.
4. Reading aloud has already been the main topic of over 20 presentations to a wide variety of community organizations.
5. In collaboration with the public schools, a measure of kindergarten readiness will debut fall 2017.

The **attached letters** from just some of Lincoln's leaders, experts, and key stakeholders confirm broad commitment to Prosper Lincoln's Early Childhood focus and of the reading aloud strategy.

LAMs Have Been Involved in the Early Childhood Collective Impact Agenda

Representatives of many of Lincoln's LAMs have been **deeply involved in developing the Prosper Lincoln agenda**. Given their unique expertise and assets, the community has asked them to take a collaborative lead in launching our community effort to support reading aloud to young children. Many LAMs already have reading nooks or occasional story times or partner with local service organizations to periodically distribute free books or are connected with national reading initiatives. This project will not disrupt those positive initiatives, but will, through the power of collective impact, align those efforts and spur additional ones to **achieve the community-endorsed goal to have all children kindergarten ready**. This project will equip LAMs to serve in a highly visible leadership role to implement this key component of the community agenda.

Community-wide and Non-traditional Involvement in Agenda-setting Process

The nine month agenda-setting process was intensive and community-based. An ambitious effort was launched that aimed to include opportunities for voice from all sectors of our community (1) nonprofits, networks, cultural centers; 2) business community; 3) neighborhoods and general public; 4) public sector; 5) faith community; 6) anchor institutions [universities, hospitals]; 7) K-12 education; and 8) philanthropy and donors). The design initiation process was kicked off at a May 2015 breakfast for 1,000 people at Pinnacle Bank Arena and concluded with the announcement of the community agenda nine months later (February 2016) at another breakfast at Pinnacle Bank Arena for 1,100 persons. An Engagement Team was formed to engage the community through attendance at the kick-off breakfast and to create opportunities for residents to share their ideas about how to respond to Lincoln Vital Signs. A 75 member Steering Committee was tasked with working through the **2,105 ideas** from throughout the community to create the Prosper Lincoln community agenda. In total, thousands of Lincoln's residents have been involved in creating the Prosper Lincoln agenda.

This project will establish a new **Read Aloud Coalition** to oversee the reading aloud agenda and will expand partners well beyond LAMs to include, for example, businesses, daycare providers and childcare centers, public schools and their community learning centers, hospitals and medical providers, lodging establishments, service clubs (high school through adult-oriented), sports leagues, refugee and ethnic-population serving centers, housing programs, community development and action, neighborhood associations, parks and community gardens, and the performing arts. As is the Prosper Lincoln model, the purpose of the coalition will be to **network and encourage others to**

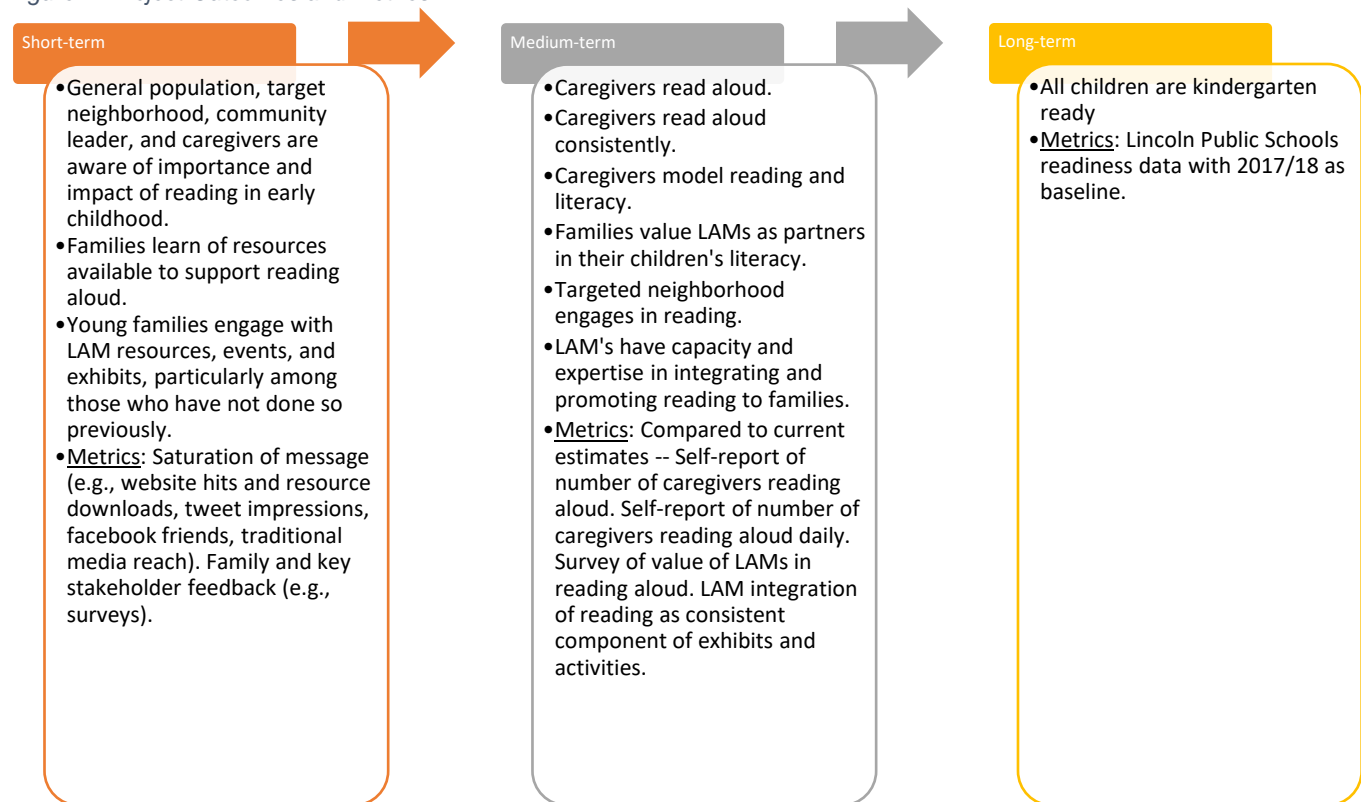
dynamically tie into the reading aloud initiative, rather than being the “director” or “approver” of others’ activities.

2. Impact

LAMs will play the lead role in achieving the community-defined positive change as measured by **kindergarten readiness**. Reading aloud in early childhood is a powerful intervention that prepares children for kindergarten and LAMs reach and resources will be catalyzed to encourage and empower caregivers to do so. The project’s activities will occur within and beyond the walls of LAMs, meaning that LAMs will be reaching out to families in their spaces of comfort as well as removing barriers for families to be welcomed into LAMs. Both approaches are essential and will be self-reinforcing: **as families learn about LAM assets they will be more likely to engage in them. As they successfully engage they will be more likely to return. Regardless of location (within or beyond LAM walls), families will learn about, dialogue about, practice, and receive support in reading aloud.**

Short- and medium-term outcomes relate to the ultimate long-term outcome of kindergarten readiness (Figure 1). **Kindergarten readiness is the overall goal for the Early Childhood agenda** established in the Proper Lincoln process.

Figure 1. Project Outcomes and Metrics



The project’s output goals are:

- 10,000 families participate in activities
- 8,000 families commit to reading aloud 15 minutes/day for one month
- 5,000 families document read aloud activity during at least 12 months of this project period
- 5,000 books are distributed to families

- 500 LAM staff, volunteers, board members, and other key community stakeholders learn about the importance and impact of reading in early childhood

Progress and achievements will be shared with the community through the Prosper Lincoln reporting vehicles (e.g., e-newsletters, website, community meetings, other social and traditional media) as well as through new channels established through this initiative. Monitoring, tracking and assessing progress toward outcomes will be combined, whenever possible, with the ongoing assessment of the impact of Prosper Lincoln conducted by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center. The Center will work with project partners to create processes for data compilation and will summarize results. The Center and partners will, likewise, engage with the IMLS third-party evaluator.

LAMs' Deep Reach into Population

Lincoln has approximately 22,000 children under the age of 6, approximately **23% of whom live in households that fall below the poverty threshold** (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). LAMs participating in this project are already places families go for dialogue and narratives and therefore they provide a strategic entry point for these children and their caregivers to engage in experiential activities around reading and to dialogue with each other (about the reading materials, relationships with the LAM collections) and with others about the experience. The LAMs already reach out to some of Lincoln's populations who may be most challenged such as low-income populations and refugee families (Nebraska receives the highest per capita number of refugees²). Additionally LAMs serve as a logical "entry" for others in the community who want to learn about and access information about supporting reading aloud as a community initiative so that Lincoln becomes known as a community that reads to its children. The five LAMs participating in this project had over **1.5 million visitors** last year and each plays a unique role in reaching children and their caregivers:

Lincoln Children's Museum (<http://www.lincolnchildrensmuseum.org/>) has been an essential community resource for families for 27 years since it began as an exhibit at the Nebraska State Fair. Today, the Museum serves an average of 155,000 guests each year and has 23,000 square feet of exhibit space for families to visit and enjoy. As stalwart proponents of the importance of early childhood development, reading has always been a critical piece of the programming conducted at the Museum. Children are gathered for story time and then are asked to create crafts and artwork demonstrating elements of their reading. Books are found throughout the Museum for children to read as they rest from their play. As the Museum invites children to create, discover and learn through the power of play, reading becomes play.

Lincoln City Libraries (<http://lincolnlibraries.org/>) provides public library service for the City of Lincoln and Lancaster County, Nebraska through eight libraries and a bookmobile. Lincoln City Libraries puts a strong emphasis on services to children, families, and low-income residents of our community, as described in the library's Strategic Plan. In the most recent reporting year, the library circulated over 3,089,000 items, had visits totaling over 1,225,000, and had children's program attendance of over 116,000. Lincoln City Libraries is a service of the City of Lincoln, with operating expenditures of \$9,999,458 in the most recent reporting year. The libraries have been engaged in work supporting reading aloud for the past 10 years, and have created collaborations with Head Start,

² In Lincoln, refugees have primarily been from Vietnam, Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan, and Karen (Myanmar). The Lincoln-Omaha area has the third largest Sudanese population in the U.S.

People's Health Center (FQHC), Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition, Lincoln Public Schools, health department, local businesses, service clubs, and non-profit organizations.

Midwestern African Museum of Art, Culture & Resource Center (<http://www.mamainc.org/>) is a new museum and is the first African art museum established in Midwest and the only known African art museum founded by an African immigrant in the U.S. The museum endeavors to be a hub of community learning and enrichment. The Museum strives to ignite creativity, encourage critical thinking, and spark conversation through an educational approach.

Nebraska History Museum (<https://history.nebraska.gov>) was founded in 1878, and in the 21st century ignites curiosity about the past and preserves historical resources to foster learning Nebraskans can use to build their futures. The Nebraska History Museum collects, interprets, and opens to all the complex stories of the peoples who have lived in this place for 12,000 years. Reopened in 2016 after a major infrastructure renovation, the museum serves as a community venue and offers new changing exhibits and public programs. Historic objects and photographic resources number over 250,000; archeological specimens are over a million. Since reopening in April 2016, the museum has hosted 30,722 visitors. Some 15,000 students are expected to experience the authentic past this spring at this AAM accredited museum.

University of Nebraska State Museum (<http://museum.unl.edu/>) is a special resource for Nebraskans, sparking people's interest in the natural world and preserving it for future generations. Established in 1871 as the first museum to be created in the state, the Nebraska State Museum has grown into one of the nation's leading university research museums-ranked in the top ten in 2016. A Smithsonian Affiliate, the State Museum is a "front door" for the University, welcoming the public and sharing with visitors the natural heritage of Nebraska. In the last fiscal year, it served over 86,000 visitors in Morrill Hall, including over 20,000 school children and has approximately 13 million specimens in its collections to support its research and teaching mission.

Responsiveness to Opportunities and Needs

The project will adapt its approaches to ensure its activities are responses to opportunities and needs. Project partners regularly review data to include: **population data** (e.g., Lincoln Vital Signs, U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, Lincoln Public Schools), input from the **Reading Aloud Coalition** (e.g., opportunities to extend reach through new partnerships), insights from **key stakeholders** (e.g., community development organizations, ethnic community centers, faith community leaders), elicitation of feedback from **participants** (e.g., event surveys and informal conversations), and success of **events or activities**. Ongoing synthesis and reflection about feedback through these sources will help project partners to understand and better direct resources to take advantage of opportunities and address needs.

Sharing with other LAMs

Lincoln is a mid-sized city in the center of the United States. Although we have great community pride, we do not boast a large philanthropic ecosystem; we are not home to a large community of international corporations; we are often referred to as fly-over country. In short, our approach will not require sizeable financial underpinnings or access to one-of-a-kind or internationally-recognized collections. Rather, our approach is built upon the power of collective impact: working together to align our intentions and measure our impact. The resources the project requires are modest and can

be **implemented by most communities with modest budgets**. We will **gladly share** all materials we develop and will invite others to use and adapt. The project is scalable, up or down, depending on the number of partnering organizations.

3. Project Design

The project will promote reading aloud to Lincoln's overall population and will target a downtown-adjacent neighborhood with extreme poverty for intensive focus. The **general population**³ will be one focus of promotion efforts because: the benefits of reading aloud accrue to all children; reading aloud should be viewed as a valuable activity for persons of all socio-economic income; persons who may read aloud to children include parents, grandparents, foster parents, older siblings, and others the primary caregiver chooses; and all persons may play a role in endorsing and embracing a culture of reading. The **South of Downtown neighborhood**, comprising two extreme poverty Census Tracts, will be the area of intensive focus. There is variation in family reading aloud, with greater participation among those with higher maternal educational attainment, incomes above the poverty threshold, two married parents, and mothers working fewer hours outside the home (see Child Trends, 2015). In the South of Downtown neighborhood approximately 42% of persons live in households with incomes below the poverty threshold (compare to 16% for Lincoln as a whole); African-American poverty is 62% in the neighborhood; most adults do not have Bachelor's degrees (72%, compared to 63% citywide); 19% are foreign born (8% in Lincoln as a whole) and 9% of households are limited English-speaking (compared to 3% in entire city).

Activities

- A. Communitywide **branding and promotional campaign** will be developed. A communications company will be engaged to develop the "brand" for reading aloud. This will include a memorable name, tagline, logo, and colors. The Prosper Lincoln Communications Committee (with membership including some of the most prominent communications experts in Lincoln) will serve as an advisory body in the development. The branding will be applied to resources that will be produced, including:
- Website that will promote reading aloud, have a calendar of reading events sponsored by/at LAMs as well as those by others, promote events, provide resources for other organizations to join, have reading suggestions, promote reading incentive schedule, and have family downloadable resources. All partners will link to the site, as will Prosper Lincoln and other supporting organizations.
 - Takeaway brochures and bookmarks to promote the program and provide a means of tracking minutes. The takeaways will be available in English, Spanish, and Arabic.
 - Posters that will be displayed widely throughout the community.
 - Pull-up signage to denote and promote reading "nooks" at partner sites and events.
 - Reciprocal promotion through LAM outreach channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, newsletters and e-newsletters, websites).
- B. Furnishing **personal books for at home reading** through age-appropriate books as incentives for participation, such as:
- Completion of a quarterly reading challenge
 - Attendance at family dinner, reading and fun events in South of Downtown events

³ The most recent Read Aloud 15 Minutes survey found that only one-third of caregivers read aloud to their children. Thus, the project seeks to reach all caregivers and others in the lives of children.

- Connect with other, existing book harvest programs to coordinate efforts and multiply impact
 - Connect with others in the community interested in underwriting books
- C. Incorporation of reading focus that **complements LAM themes and events** on ongoing basis at each partner:
- Complementary reading materials to accompany events and exhibits
 - Reading nooks featuring shelves of books that invite children and families to take a break and read
 - Suggested resources for further reading
 - Promotion of the overall reading aloud program to all visitors
- D. Each week, at least one LAM will host a **reading-focused and thematic activity** that will:
- Engage children
 - Model to families
 - Provide complementary hands-on games, activities, and experiments
- E. Each month, at least one LAM will host a **beyond the walls reading-focused event** that will feature the bullets above and will also take the LAM into the community to also promote the assets of LAMs.
- F. At least quarterly, there will be a hosted evening in the South of Downtown neighborhood and promoted in collaboration with the elementary schools, CLCs, faith community, neighborhood association, day care homes and centers, community development organization. The event will be marketed as a **family fun event** and will include:
- Transportation, if needed
 - Dinner
 - Games, activities, and experiments
 - Reading resources that complement the above (or evening theme)
 - Books as attendance incentives
 - Multi-media evidence-based approaches to helping parents effectively engage in reading aloud (Lane & Wright, 2007)
 - Promotion of the overall reading program
- G. At least quarterly, there will be time-bounded **discovery challenges**:
- These will expand existing reading programs to the entire year and will focus on attaining a target number of reading minutes
 - Families will track minutes on bookmarks or brochures. There are two information technology companies who, when they heard of this initiative, expressed interest in creating a free app, as an in-kind contribution to the community. Since arrangements have not been finalized, this is mentioned as a possibility, but not as a solid deliverable.
 - Challenges may also combine reading with participation in addition to/instead of LAM activities
 - Rewards for challenge achievement will likely be graduated and will include books, LAM admissions, and drawings for larger prizes
- H. Annually there will be a city **reading aloud celebration**:
- Promoting the reading aloud program
 - Entertainment and special visitors (e.g., popular child-focused local bands, local dignitaries reading aloud, children's book authors, book/public television characters)

- I. At least annually, experts will **train LAM staff, volunteers, boards, and other community stakeholders** on the importance and impact of reading in early childhood

The **Lincoln Community Foundation is committed to providing a cash match**, but given the high visibility of Prosper Lincoln and the enthusiasm it has generated, it is likely that a number of budgeted costs will be provided as in-kind contributions from others. This will allow an expansion to the resources and activities listed above. For example, a company may be willing to underwrite t-shirts that could be given to children as incentives for achieving reading aloud goals. Those t-shirts could be used in order to receive free LAM entry. The Coalition, partners, and the Lincoln Community Foundation will seek and coordinate efforts such as this that will allow the initiative to expand beyond the described scope.

LAM Involvement and Ownership

LAMs created this proposal and are committed to meeting regularly to coordinate and evolve the initiative. At a minimum, the **Key Personnel** will meet quarterly for in-depth review and planning with the Project Director. Each LAM will designate a **staff contact** with whom the Project Director will regularly communicate and these staff will convene to share information and expertise in execution of activities and joint promotion. Supporting the LAMs are:

Lincoln Community Foundation will be home to the Project Director who will provide overall coordination for the initiative. Since the Foundation is the collective impact backbone for the overall Prosper Lincoln agenda, the Project Director’s location at the Foundation will ensure connection with the agenda and within building access to the Early Childhood lead who is employed at the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation within the same building, both located in downtown Lincoln and directly across the street from the Lincoln City Libraries main office, two blocks from the Children’s Museum and Historical Society and only several blocks further to the University Museum and MAMA. The South of Downtown neighborhood is directly adjacent within two blocks. The Foundation will support the Project Director with its staff of communications/marketing, financial, and administrative professionals to ensure all aspects of grants management are addressed.

University of Nebraska Public Policy Center will provide assistance in tracking process and outcomes including integrating with the Prosper Lincoln evaluation plan wherever possible, develop data collection tools and processes (e.g., minutes read diaries, surveys), analyze and report results, and consult with a possible national evaluator. The Center has long experience as an evaluator for federally-funded projects.

Decision Points, Risks, and Mitigation Strategies

In the project design, the planning group has identified four key drivers (Table 1).

Table 1. Key Drivers

Decision Points	Risks	Mitigation Strategies
Project director is selected	Person lacks entrepreneurial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners will participate in the hiring process.

	and collective impact sensibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past experience in hiring focus area leads will be applied and has been extremely successful in identifying exemplary persons.
Reading Aloud Coalition is formed	Coalition members lack ownership and do not mobilize networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members will be fully oriented into the purpose, impact, and connectedness of initiative to Prosper Lincoln. • Meetings will be convened at times and locations to accommodate needs. • Project Director will regularly communicate with members. • Members will receive all Prosper Lincoln communications. • Prosper Lincoln’s “lessons learned” that have been effective will be applied to establishment of the Coalition.
Brand design is selected	Design fails to convey the bold, memorable, fun, and exciting opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Prosper Lincoln Communications Committee will advise. • An experience communications firm will be selected to develop the brand. • Lincoln Communication Communications Vice-president will consult on all aspects of development. • LAMs will provide feedback from their expertise and with solicit feedback from their audiences and stakeholders.
Families decide to engage	Families do not participate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners will meet to review progress and outcomes to monitor adoption of reading aloud and evolve program as needed with input from the coalition, families, and other key stakeholders. • Partners will apply practices that have been successful in drawing family participation. • Lincoln Community Foundation will activate Prosper Lincoln infrastructure to support and promote reading aloud.

Project Continuation Beyond IMLS Funding

The Prosper Lincoln approach is to create new connections and structures that will last beyond the community’s 4 year commitment to its three focal areas. That is, Prosper Lincoln is not striving to establish new programs, but rather to **forge relationships and systems** that are more effective ways of enhancing the community’s assets and addressing the community’s needs. Once capacity and networks are established, continuation of the program will be fairly minimal and it is expected that the Foundation may identify business and other community partners who will be willing to donate or underwrite needs such as printing costs, event production, and entry fees.

Summary

Lincoln’s **LAMs have been asked to leverage their unique assets and reach** to lead the community-developed and endorsed reading aloud initiative. This project places them at **the center of the collective impact agenda** to achieve real improvements in the **lives of children** at a critical point in the trajectory of their learning and lives.