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Literacy for All Students: The LFAS Partnership and Collaboration Structure
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FEBRUARY 2026 *(Correction)*

Series Overview: The LFAS report series documents the design, partnership development, and initial implementation of a citywide literacy initiative led by SchoolSmartKC. Each report focuses on a different aspect of the initiative, from its origins and design philosophy to its collaboration structure and lessons learned during rollout — offering a thorough view of how Kansas City stakeholders are working together to improve literacy outcomes. The series offers insight to practitioners, funders, and policymakers seeking to understand and replicate evidence-based, locally driven approaches to literacy improvement. **Learn more by reading Bellwether's** Literacy for All Students **series.**

A Case Study on Partnerships

> *"Partnerships were not just supportive — they were foundational. The complexity of improving literacy required shared ownership, clear roles, and a common vision."* —SchoolSmartKC Team Member[1]

Introduction

Literacy shapes how children learn, think, and engage with the world, and it significantly influences their future success far beyond school. However, 77% of third graders[2] in Kansas City, Missouri, are not proficient in English language arts (ELA), and at least 290,000 adults in the Greater Kansas City region currently struggle with basic literacy skills.[3] These numbers represent more than a learning gap; they signal systemic inequity that limits access to higher education, career opportunities, and economic mobility.[4]

SchoolSmart Kansas City (SchoolSmartKC), a nonprofit dedicated to accelerating student growth and proficiency for Kansas City students, recognized that improving literacy could not be treated as an isolated school-by-school issue or solved by short-term interventions. In 2024, the organization launched LFAS, an ambitious, citywide initiative aimed at unifying Kansas City's fragmented education landscape under a shared, evidence-based literacy vision. LFAS is not a new curriculum or mandate. It is a coordinated initiative that brings together families, educators, funders, and community partners to ensure every child in Kansas City is proficient in ELA by third grade.

The LFAS initiative reflects SchoolSmartKC's belief that lasting change comes through community investment and collaboration. Inspired by literacy reform success in Mississippi, the LFAS model's design intentionally blends research-backed practices with local innovation, anchoring instruction in the Science of Reading, building leadership capacity through coaching and professional learning, and engaging families and communities as true partners in student success (Sidebar).

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1   **Note**: *An earlier version of this case study misidentified the William T. Kemper Foundation – Commerce Bank, Trustee, as the Kemper Foundation. The error has been corrected.*

This case study explores how SchoolSmartKC harnessed the complementary strengths of families, educators, funders, and community partners to align resources with community needs and build trust, creating an initiative that is both equitable and sustainable.

Partnership Philosophy: Everyone Has a Role

> *"[SchoolSmartKC] finds the best people to lead the work — and then they let them lead it."*

—SchoolSmartKC Community Partner[5]

Kansas City's educational landscape is complex and historically fragmented. The city's public education system is split among multiple charter networks and the Kansas City Public Schools district, and supported by numerous private funders and nonprofits, each pursuing its own improvement agenda. While this diversity brings innovation, it has also led to duplication, competition for resources, and inconsistent implementation of evidence-based practices. SchoolSmartKC knew that achieving systemwide literacy improvement, as evidenced in Mississippi, would require more than funding or isolated interventions. Instead, it would require deep, authentic partnerships to support lasting, systemic change.

SchoolSmartKC set out to create an ecosystem where every partner could contribute according to its strengths and resources, from funders and schools to families and researchers. This approach to collaboration and partnership was built on three strategies: building a shared vision and ownership; designing inclusive and flexible structures that support sustainability; and sustaining collaboration through trust and transparency.

Building Shared Vision and Ownership

From the beginning, SchoolSmartKC recognized that sustainable change in literacy across Kansas City would not come from an external mandate, but from collaboration with on-the-ground partners. Rather than designing a top-down initiative, SchoolSmartKC invited educators, funders, community organizations, and family partners into a series of co-design sessions to shape the LFAS model together. These sessions surfaced critical questions: What does high-quality literacy instruction look like in Kansas City? What barriers prevent it? How can partners work collectively to sustain improvement over time? During one of the initial LFAS meetings, a school leader remarked that it was the first time they had ever been asked what would make the greatest impact, underscoring how rare authentic collaboration had been in Kansas City's education landscape. Meeting with Kansas City Public Schools Superintendent Jennifer Collier early on also proved pivotal in building cross-sector buy-in; her participation encouraged funders who had traditionally

supported only charter schools to invest in the broader Kansas City Public Education System.[8]

Through this co-design approach, LFAS evolved as a shared civic enterprise rather than a single-organization initiative. The Kansas City Royals Foundation; Sherman Family Foundation; William T. Kemper Foundation – Commerce Bank, Trustee; and Sosland Foundation became anchor funders, signaling a broad-sector commitment. Partnerships with the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) and New Leaders strengthened school leadership capacity. At the same time, organizations such as the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) deepened family engagement.

> *"SchoolSmartKC didn't come in with all the answers — they asked the right questions and built a model with us, not for us."*
>
> —SchoolSmartKC Community Partner[9]

To extend this collective vision, SchoolSmartKC also built bridges across Kansas City's existing literacy ecosystem, positioning other literacy organizations as collaborators rather than competitors. As one community partner said, "SchoolSmartKC's greatest strength is how they bring people together — not to compete for credit, but to move toward a shared purpose."[10] SchoolSmartKC partnered with community-based efforts such as Reach Out and Read KC,[11] Lead to Read,[12] Dreams KC, and Turn the Page KC,[13] by providing grants and shared learning opportunities to strengthen alignment and amplify its community mobilization work.

What makes LFAS distinctive is its structure of shared accountability. Each partner, from funders to families, has a clearly defined role in advancing literacy, and all are expected to learn and adapt together. SchoolSmartKC sustains this alignment through regular convenings that bring current and prospective partners together to share data, reflect on progress, and reaffirm the collective goal: ensuring every Kansas City student can read proficiently and confidently by third grade.[14]

Inclusive and Flexible Partnership Structures Support Sustainability

> *"Every organization, every business, can play a part. By widening the tent, we're creating a movement."*
>
> —Robin Henderson, Ph.D., Chief Program Officer, SchoolSmartKC[15]

Partnership recruitment was broad and inclusive, with the goal of making literacy improvement everyone's business. As SchoolSmartKC's Henderson described it, they wanted stakeholders across the city to feel a "fear of missing out" if they were not contributing to improving literacy outcomes for the city's students.[16]

SchoolSmartKC also knew that its best partners would be local organizations that would understand the context and the potential impact of improved student outcomes on the community. SchoolSmartKC created a target that 80%-90% of LFAS partners should be based in the Kansas City region to ensure the initiative was shaped by entities and people with a vested interest in the outcomes, and for the initiative to develop, elevate, and build on local talent. This ethos spread to other partners as well. One funder said that when she speaks to her colleagues in the philanthropic community, she encourages them to get involved, even if they cannot contribute in the same way her organization does. She always asks, "What can you bring to the table to support literacy?"[17]

Broadly, the partnership structure has three categories: school, philanthropic, and community and implementation partners (Appendix).

School Partnerships

SchoolSmartKC's partnerships with school leaders are grounded in inclusion and customization of implementation. Rather than imposing a uniform model, SchoolSmartKC listens to each school's context and needs in regular meetings with school leaders, working alongside school leaders to co-design implementation plans that reflect each school's unique strengths, needs, and student populations. This collaborative approach gives leaders ownership over decisions such as staffing, coaching structures, and implementation timelines, to help ensure that LFAS complemented, not disrupted, existing school strategies. For instance, one school chose to focus its LFAS resources on improving teachers' capacity and professional development rather than expanding tutoring. Some principals reported that this level of flexibility and the ability to co-create implementation plans made the initiative feel less like an external mandate and more like a shared investment, reinforcing trust. One leader emphasized how the collaborative structure of LFAS felt different from compulsory interventions, which often offered little or no flexibility: "We want support, [which LFAS gave us], not to be 'fixed.'"[18]

LFAS also created new structures for professional learning and collaboration across schools. Through partnerships with organizations like UMKC and New Leaders, school leaders participated in fellowships and cross-school cohorts designed to build capacity in evidence-based instructional practices. Principals and literacy coaches from both district and charter schools engaged in shared learning walks, data reflection sessions, and peer problem-solving. Some school leaders reported that this collaborative structure has helped support a shift in their school from building-focused interventions to a culture of shared continuous improvement. As leaders learned from one another, they began to align on what effective literacy instruction looks like across Kansas City schools. The once-uncommon partnership between district and charter principals has now become a defining feature of LFAS, proof that shared purpose, when grounded in relationships and flexibility, can transcend governance boundaries and drive systemwide change.

Philanthropic Partners

Acting as the anchor and convener, SchoolSmartKC recruits both long-standing and new funders of literacy initiatives in Kansas City, aligning their investments toward a unified vision for literacy. At the heart of LFAS is a network of philanthropic partners — including the Kansas City Royals Foundation; the Sherman Family Foundation; the William T. Kemper Foundation – Commerce Bank, Trustee; the Sosland Foundation; and others — that fund specific schools through an adopt-a-school model.

Rather than pooling philanthropic dollars into one central fund, SchoolSmartKC designed a building-based buy-in model. This "adopt-a-school" approach provides funders with tangible, personal relationships within school communities, allowing them to see the impact of their investment firsthand. Each participating school receives four years of support, providing schools with a financial runway to discover what works for their students without overtaxing existing budgets. This funding model prioritizes sustainability, scale, and systems change. By the end of the funding period, the goal is for school leaders to have the data, capacity, and confidence to incorporate successful practices into their regular operations.

SchoolSmartKC played a pivotal role in helping funders shift from short-term, program-specific giving to multiyear, systems-level investment. During the initial pitch, SchoolSmartKC's leadership met with five major funders to discuss the importance of a four-year commitment. Some hesitated, questioning the value of long-term giving in an uncertain policy environment. SchoolSmartKC's Henderson recalled funders saying, "In four years, there could be a new governor," to which she replied, "Yes. And kids still won't read."[19] SchoolSmartKC emphasized that lasting improvement in literacy requires consistent funding to support

instructional quality, data use, and systemic alignment. They shared early pilot data showing that one-year efforts focused on joy and engagement had not led to measurable literacy gains among students. This data-driven and transparent approach helped funders see the value of multiyear commitments. As one reflected, "If philanthropy doesn't take risks, then who can?"[20] Several funders made their largest and longest commitments to date, signaling a shift toward shared responsibility and long-term collaboration to improve literacy outcomes citywide.

Community and Implementation Partnerships

Partnerships with community groups also helped bridge divides between schools and families, empowering parents to engage directly with one another. SchoolSmartKC partnered with organizations such as the PLTI and Dreams KC to build parent capacity and influence. PLTI helped shift school mindsets from "parent involvement" driven by school priorities to "parent partnership," where parents authentically engage in improvement efforts, equipping families to identify engagement gaps, co-create communication tools, and pilot outreach strategies.

To build educator capacity and align professional learning with the Science of Reading, SchoolSmartKC collaborated with the UMKC Institute for Urban Education and New Leaders. These partnerships provided the technical expertise and leadership development needed to translate research-based practices into classroom impact.

The Kansas City Royals Foundation originally worked with SchoolSmartKC on a narrower effort — the Royals Literacy League — a program designed to support the "joy and motivation" piece of reading by providing books to schools, inviting professional athletes to visit schools to talk about reading, and inviting students and families to literacy nights at the MLB stadium. Based on its positive experience partnering with SchoolSmartKC, the foundation expanded its support to continue providing these resources to LFAS schools.

Sustain Collaboration Through Trust and Transparency

Sustaining collaboration across dozens of schools, funders, and community organizations requires more than coordination; it requires trust, transparency, and constant communication. As the backbone organization for the LFAS initiative, SchoolSmartKC plays a dual role as convener and facilitator, communicating regularly with all partners and creating space for them to collaborate. This approach allows for both holding all parties accountable and providing the required flexibility to meet the realities of schools and partners on the ground.

SchoolSmartKC's leaders engage in near-constant dialogue with partners by hosting convenings, coordinating data sharing, and providing individualized support to ensure alignment and effective problem-solving. SchoolSmartKC's Chief Program Officer Henderson meets with partners on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly cadence, depending on their needs, always signaling that collaboration is a shared endeavor: "I really want people to know that I am on your team."[21] This personalized engagement has helped partners feel both supported and accountable. As one school leader reflected, "Working with Robin [Henderson] and UMKC, we've almost fully gotten it all together. Once we get all the supports in place, we'll start to see real change."[22]

SchoolSmartKC's credibility also stems from its ability to bridge funders' expectations and the on-the-ground realities of school implementation. When some funders pushed for tutoring to begin immediately, SchoolSmartKC's chief program officer facilitated transparent conversations with principals and literacy coaches, who advocated for strengthening Tier 1 instruction before expanding tutoring. Through open communication, SchoolSmartKC leadership secured funder alignment with a phased approach that honored instructional priorities while maintaining momentum toward tutoring implementation. Rather than imposing a directive, SchoolSmartKC helped both sides find a shared solution, reinforcing that effective partnerships depend on listening as much as leading.

Ongoing, transparent communication has become the heartbeat of the LFAS model. The SchoolSmartKC team approaches every interaction as an opportunity to learn, adapt, and build confidence across the network. As one funder explained, "SchoolSmartKC's role is not simply to manage collaboration but to model it by bridging priorities, honoring expertise, and keeping everyone focused on the shared goal of literacy for all."[23]

Partnerships: Challenges and Lessons Learned

SchoolSmartKC faced challenges in building and maintaining partnerships but overcame these obstacles through communication and adaptation. Even with LFAS in its initial stages, SchoolSmartKC, additional funders, and community partners can already point to valuable lessons for other cities, regions, or states seeking to launch literacy initiatives.

Modeling vulnerability and transparent communication builds credibility and trust across sectors.

Past leadership changes and perceptions of limited community engagement created skepticism among some partners that SchoolSmartKC was the right organization to lead a citywide literacy initiative. Before gaining full participation, SchoolSmartKC first needed to demonstrate consistency, transparency, and humility. Funders, educators, and community leaders were looking for assurance that the LFAS model would be grounded in honest communication and shared ownership rather than top-down coordination.

SchoolSmartKC's leadership openly acknowledged past difficulties and emphasized a collaborative, learning-oriented mindset. Across regional and community groups, SchoolSmartKC's leaders were praised for their authenticity and commitment to building trusting relationships by acknowledging past mistakes and clearly outlining what would change with the LFAS initiative.

Start small, build trust, and scale through evidence.

LFAS faced challenges with gaining full support and alignment across schools, funders, and community partners. Some foundations in Kansas City traditionally operate independently, either funding projects in silos or working within small, familiar collaboratives. This makes large-scale, collective investment a cultural and logistical challenge. Achieving full philanthropic alignment remains a work in progress, as many funders still seek early, measurable results before committing to broader investment. This lack of collaborative cohesion limits the speed and scale of implementation across the city. One funder noted the inherent complexity of SchoolSmartKC's position, explaining that "they are not just a funder — they also have to raise money for their future."[24] Balancing those dual roles as investor and fundraiser adds another layer of challenge to sustaining deep, collective partnerships.

Rather than waiting for universal buy-in, SchoolSmartKC focused on demonstrating success through early pilot partnerships and transparent data sharing. Starting small has helped build credibility, attract additional investors, and gradually expand the LFAS initiative's reach.

Plan for sustainability from the start.

LFAS participants receive four years of funding support, and while that is longer than many initiatives, sustaining support beyond that period requires long-term planning. Schools and partners need to map core LFAS components to ongoing budget and operations, build line items, and streamline roles and vendor costs so successful practices can continue past the initial grant funding.

Embedding LFAS in Kansas City's philanthropic and community networks supports that transition. Local partners help schools test, refine, and document what works, attract additional investments, and build civic ownership. Over time, operating funds and public dollars can replace philanthropic grants. Early planning for this hand off helps support strong implementation after the grant period ends.

Conclusion

The LFAS initiative is grounded in the idea that systemic change in education begins with people working together toward a shared vision. By leveraging Kansas City's education and philanthropic communities, SchoolSmartKC has built a model that aims to address immediate student literacy needs while also laying the foundation for systemic improvement. The initiative's emphasis on sustainability, data-driven practice, and authentic partnerships reflects a broader understanding that improving literacy is not a quick fix, but rather a lasting investment in the city's future workforce, economy, and civic life.

By working with partners through challenges, such as aligning diverse priorities and cultivating genuine collaboration in historically divided spaces, SchoolSmartKC discovered that transformational, rather than transactional, partnerships require open communication, adaptability, and a deep belief in collective impact. As LFAS continues to build momentum, SchoolSmartKC's partnership model offers a blueprint for other communities and a reminder that progress is possible when everyone has a seat at the table, when accountability is shared, and when success is measured not by individual contributions but by collective effort. ✦

Appendix

Partner Type	Contribution	Partners
School Partnerships		
Schools	Implement literacy supports	• 5 Kansas City Public School sites (KCPS) • 1 Hickman Mills C-1 school • 6 Kansas City charter schools
District and Charter Management Organization/ Charter Leaders	Co-design thought partners	• 5 KCPS schools • 1 Hickman Mills C-1 school • 6 Kansas City charter schools
Community and Implementation Partnerships		
School Support Providers	Support educators and school leaders	• UMKC's Institute for Urban Education; New Leaders
Family Support Providers	Provide advocacy training for families and support for cultivating literacy at home	• Dreams KC • PLTI KC
Parents and Families	Provide support and encouragement to students	• Members of the LFAS Citywide Literacy Advisory Council • Families of LFAS students
Literacy Partners	Support literacy improvements in the community and provide thought partnership for SchoolSmartKC	• Reach Out and Read KC • Lead to Read • Turn the Page KC
Researchers	Document outcomes and guide improvement	• UMKC's Urban Education Research Center
Philanthropic Partnerships		
Funders	Sustain multiyear investment in literacy	• The Kansas City Royals Foundation • Sherman Family Foundation • SchoolSmartKC • The William T. Kemper Foundation – Commerce Bank, Trustee • The Sosland Foundation • Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

Endnotes

1   Interview with SchoolSmartKC team member, August 2025.

2   Based on 2024 KCPES (combining KCPS and charters) data with 15% proficient and 8% advanced. "Data for Action Summit: Kansas City Public Education System," SchoolSmartKC et al., presentation, June 2025, slide 35, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q2SYRNVXeFEiULWx1YfXO44oyG8sFkuL/view?usp=drive_link.

3   The authors estimated the number of adults with low literacy in the Kansas City bi-state region using federal survey data and census population counts. First, authors defined the region as 15 counties identified by the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce ("About," Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, https://www.kcchamber.com/about/): the Missouri counties of Bates, Caldwell, Cass, Clay, Jackson, Lafayette, Platte, and Ray, and the Kansas counties of Douglas, Franklin, Johnson, Leavenworth, Linn, Miami, and Wyandotte. For each county, authors used the National Center for Education Statistics' Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Skills Map (*Comparison Charts of State and County Estimates: Missouri* [Institute of Education Sciences], https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/Missouri.pdf, pages 8–10, and *Comparison Charts of State and County Estimates: Kansas* [Institute of Education Sciences], https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/Kansas.pdf, pages 7–8) to find the percentage of adults ages 16–74 with very low literacy (at or below "Level 1"). Authors then used the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey ("Census Reporter Profile Page for Kansas City, MO-KS Metro Area," *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*, U.S. Census Bureau, 2023, https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US28140-kansas-city-mo-ks-metro-area/) to obtain the number of residents ages 18 and over in each county. To estimate how many adults have low literacy in each county, authors multiplied the PIAAC percentage by the county's adult population. Finally, authors added the county estimates together to get a total for the 15-county region and divided by the total adult population to calculate a metro-wide percentage. Note that the PIAAC data are 2012–2017, and the ACS data are 2023, and the age groups do not perfectly align. Because these estimates are based on survey data and statistical modeling rather than a full head count, the results should be interpreted as approximate (a best estimate and order of magnitude), not as an exact number of individuals.

4   See, for example: Kelly Robson Foster et al., *On the Same Page: A Primer on the Science of Reading and Its Future for Policymakers, School Leaders, and Advocates* (Bellwether, January 2024), slide 7, https://bellwether.org/publications/on-the-same-page/; "Examining the Link Between Poor Literacy Skills and Dropout," Lexia Learning, July 17, 2019, https://www.lexialearning.com/blog/examining-link-between-poor-literacy-skills-and-dropout; Mark Vineis, "Future of Work: Building a Stronger Workforce Through Literacy," ProLiteracy, June 26, 2024, para. 3, https://www.proliteracy.org/news/future-of-work-building-a-stronger-workforce-through-literacy/; Anita Sands, Sarah Cacicio, and Cheryl Lavigne, "Building a Resilient Workforce: The Critical Role of Foundational Literacy Skills," All In: The Adult Literacy & Learning Impact Network, https://allinliteracy.org/building-a-resilient-workforce-the-critical-role-of-foundational-literacy-skills/.

5   Interview with SchoolSmartKC community partner, August 2025.

6   "Literacy-Based Promotion Act," Mississippi Department of Education, https://mdek12.org/literacy/lbpa/.

7   *Mississippi's 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Mississippi Department of Education, 2025), https://mdek12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2025/01/NAEPRankings-OnePager-2025-0115-JC-v02.pdf.

8   Note that KCPES includes all public district and charter schools in Kansas City, Missouri.

9   Interview with SchoolSmartKC community partner, August 2025.

10   Interview with SchoolSmartKC community partner, August 2025.

11   "Reach Out and Read Kansas City," KU Medical Center, https://www.kumc.edu/reach-out-and-read.html.

12   Lead to Read KC website, https://leadtoreadkc.org/.

13   Turn the Page KC website, https://www.turnthepagekc.org/.

14   Lynne Wells Graziano, Jessica Slaton, Daniela Torre Gibney, and Titilayo Tinubu Ali, *Literacy for All Students: Design Philosophy and Key Design Elements*, (Bellwether, January 2026), https://bellwether.org/publications/literacy-for-all-students/.

15   Interview with Robin Henderson, SchoolSmartKC, August 2025.

16   Interview with Robin Henderson, SchoolSmartKC, August 2025.

17   Interview with LFAS funder, August 2025.

18   Interview with LFAS participating school leader, August 2025.

19   Interview with Robin Henderson, SchoolSmartKC, November 2025.

20   Interview with LFAS funder, August 2025.

21   Interview with Robin Henderson, SchoolSmartKC, August 2025.

22   Interview with LFAS participating school leader, September 2025.

23   Interview with LFAS funder, August 2025.

24   Interview with LFAS funder, August 2025.

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that works to transform education to ensure young people — especially those furthest from opportunity — achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we help mission-driven partners accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and bring leaders together to drive change on education's most pressing challenges. For more, visit **bellwether.org**.

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