



CASE STUDY | ROCKFORD'S DATA WALK ON 3RD GRADE READING

SYLVIA CHEUY

This case study shares the story of two collective impact initiatives in Rockford Illinois which have teamed up to mobilize their community to ensure every 3rd Grader in their community reads at or above grade level. At a recent community meeting they used an interactive data walk process to create deeper, shared understanding of the issue and begin building a common agenda to achieve this key educational milestone.

3RD GRADE READING: A KEY EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME

June 2018 marked the culmination of months of research, conversation and community discussions led by two collaborative initiatives in Rockford Illinois – Transform Rockford and Alignment Rockford – who have united their efforts to ensure that all third grade students in their community are reading at or above the third grade level.

Third grade reading level is a crucial milestone in a child's development. The National Research Council links low reading levels in the third grade to future failures stating that any child who is not reading well by the end of third grade is unlikely to graduate high school. Poor readers also tend to have more behavioral and social problems. Research by sociologist Donald Hernandez found that children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers.

Reading by the end of third grade "...is an essential step toward increasing the number of children who succeed academically, graduate high school on time, and do well in life and in the workforce."

*KIDS COUNT Special Report
Annie E. Casey Foundation*

Black and Hispanic children who are not reading proficiently in third grade are twice as likely as similar white children not to graduate from high school (about 25% vs. 14%). Add poverty to the analysis and the findings are even more sobering. Reading by the end of third grade matters. "It is an essential step toward increasing the number of children who succeed academically, graduate high school on time, and do well in life and in the workforce," states the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT special report.

BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING THROUGH DATA

The combined efforts of Transform Rockford, Alignment Rockford and a third foundational partner – the Northern Illinois Center for Nonprofit Excellence (NICNE) – have successfully built enthusiastic support for the shared aspiration of ensuring reading success for all of Rockford's 3rd graders. This is an important first step. However, equally important is to create shared understanding around the multitude of factors that contribute to 3rd graders in Rockford not achieving reading success – understanding “root causes” and building consensus on the best way to address them.

Data is a powerful and tangible source of information. But data alone is not enough. To realize the full potential of data to help define the scope of an issue; or to assist in focusing, monitoring and tracking the progress and effectiveness of proposed solutions, it must be linked with opportunities for sense-making. It is the sense-making of data that generates rich conversations and is the spark that ignites a drive for community change.

A Data Walk is a powerful process for engaging diverse stakeholders in a shared sense-making process around data. Data Walks were developed by The Urban Institute “as a means of sharing data and research findings with stakeholders.” The multiple benefits they have identified of the Data Walk process include:

- **Builds Capacity** – Data Walks offer stakeholders and community members to read and interpret data, apply it to real life and discuss how it aligns with their own personal experience
- **Engages and Empowers Residents** – Data Walks offer opportunities for the community to participate in collective problem-solving and civic engagement
- **Encourages Dialogue** – Data Walks encourage the interpretations from diverse perspectives to be shared thereby encouraging a richer appreciation of the factors – and opportunities for action – to address an issue
- **Affirms Lived Experience** – Data Walks provide a powerful forum for sharing and affirming the knowledge and value of the perspectives of context experts
- **Fosters Mutual Understanding** – Data Walks help to create a “level playing field” for all stakeholders to become analysts. They help offer better explanations for where and why existing programs and services may be falling short and help illuminate opportunities for additional action.

In Rockford, the data walk held during their community meeting proved to be a valuable opportunity to spark learning and understanding across diverse perspectives. At each data station the information sparked rich conversation and generated insights as a variety of different perspectives were shared. This in turn allowed all participants to experience first-hand the value of working together across a diversity of perspectives.

“As a movement, we are committed to systemic change in the area of grade level reading. We know long-term investment, engagement & partnerships with community stakeholders are necessary to achieve success.”

- Anisha Grimmert
Executive Director, Alignment Rockford

Information is power, so making the data universally available helped put everyone on the same page in terms of information and knowledge. The conversations generated at each data walk station offered participants an opportunity to better appreciate the interconnectedness and complexity of 3rd grade reading success. This was particularly important for some, who initially viewed the problem as a fairly straight-forward one to fix. Time and again, as the small groups worked to make sense of the data in front of them, one person's initial "solution" would be questioned as others identified additional contributing factors needing to be addressed. These conversations helped the community to avoid leaping to quickly to "quick-fix" solutions which, at best, would likely generate limited solutions.

DESIGNING A DATA WALK

There are a number of important considerations in planning a Data Walk. These include:

- 1. Be Clear About Your Goals** – It's important to be clear about why you are hosting a data walk and what you want to learn from it. In Rockford, the goals of the 3rd Grade Reading Community Data Walk were:
 - To foster a shared and deepened understanding of significant, non-school, contributing factors to 3rd Grade Reading Success in Rockford
 - To inform, engage and empower community leaders take action to improve 3rd Grade Reading Levels in Rockford
 - To emphasize the need for collective action and community mobilization to ensure all of Rockford's 3rd Graders are reading at or above grade level
- 2. Who Needs to Participate?** – To encourage rich dialogue and foster shared understanding Data Walks work best when there are a diverse mix of people/perspectives. Including community residents is particularly valuable. The location of the venue, the day and time of the session, offering childcare, transportation and a good meal all can help to contribute to encouraging participation. The Rockford Data Walk gathering included delicious food and was held in a centrally located venue and hosted by NICNE – a trusted and neutral convener.
- 3. Establishing Shared Agreements** – To "set the stage" for the Data Walk it is important that participants understand the goals of the process; a bit about how the data was chosen; and, how the insights they share will be used. Establishing some shared agreements about how participants agree to treat one another can also help to ensure that the small group dialogues at each data station are rich and constructive.

The Rockford Data Walk process was fortunate to have a team of facilitators who were willing to host each data station. In addition to helping ensure the dialogues were constructive, they helped capture each group's observations and question and also provided the facilitators with valuable insights for enhancing the Data Walk process in the future

- 4. Your Venue** – An ideal venue to host your Data Walk is somewhat dependent on the number of data points you are choosing to feature (ideally no more than 4-6 data points). Each data point is set up as its own "station" that includes a large posters of the data and 1-3 dialogue questions that used clear, simple language. Each station should be far enough apart that the small groups visiting each station can hear one another speak.

Rockford chose to feature 4 data points about 3rd grade reading. Because there were approximately eighty participants at their community meeting, 2 identical data walks were set up to ensure each small group had no more than 10 participants.

5. **Choosing the Data to Profile** – The intent of a Data Walk is not to offer a comprehensive overview of ALL available data – but rather to profile a small number of data points that are most pertinent, are likely to generate rich dialogue and are helpful in fostering a more nuanced understanding of priority issues. It is also important to offer State and/or National comparators for each piece of local data if possible as this helps to create more context. In Rockford, the facilitators actually had to set up a “parking lot” list to capture requests and recommendations from data walk participants for additional data they would like to have access to (if it was available) to further enrich their understanding of the issue.

The four data points selected by Rockford around the issue of 3rd Grade Reading were:

- The number of 3rd Graders in Rockford who were reading below, at or above grade level
 - The number of Rockford 3rd Graders who were below, at or above grade level linked to whether they were in a low-income, mid-income or high-income family
 - The number of 3rd Graders reading below, at or above grade level linked to mobility rates (how frequently they moved throughout the school year) and,
 - The number of 3rd Graders below, at or above grade level linked to school absenteeism rates
6. **Data Dialogue Questions** – Each “data station” also includes 2 or 3 discussion questions written in simple language. The first question is often aimed at generating people’s initial reactions (both positive and negative). At least one question should also invite further reflection and exploration.

Rockford used the same initial two reflection question at each of their four data stations:

- ***What AHAs to you have (both positive and negative) about this data?***
- ***What questions does this data raise for you?***

Each station also included one focused reflection question based upon the data. The 4 reflection questions were:

- **DATA POINT: The number of 3rd Graders in Rockford who were reading below, at or above grade level** REFLECTIVE QUESTION: ***What are some factors, outside of school, that might affect 3rd Grade Reading?***
- **DATA POINT: The number of Rockford 3rd Graders who were below, at or above grade level linked to whether they were in a low-income, mid-income or high-income family** REFLECTIVE QUESTION: ***In what ways might family income levels affect a Rockford 3rd Grader’s ability to read at or above grade level?***
- **DATA POINT: The number of 3rd Graders reading below, at or above grade level linked to mobility rates (how frequently they moved throughout the school year)** REFLECTIVE QUESTION: ***What factors might contribute to higher mobility rates for Rockford 3rd Graders?***

- **DATA POINT: The number of 3rd Graders below, at or above grade level linked to school absenteeism rates** REFLECTIVE QUESTION: *What might be some factors that could affect absenteeism rates for Rockford 3rd Graders?*

Because Alignment and Transform Rockford wanted various stakeholders to focus on sharing ownership for creating solutions – and to avoid a common trap of assuming that “it was ONLY the school’s responsibility” to address issues of reading success, their reflective questions were explicit in asking groups to identify “non-school factors.”

7. Data Walk Facilitation Tips – Below are some tips to help ensure your Data Walk is well-facilitated and helps participants to make sense of the data together:

- To ensure rich dialogue, and foster connections across sectors, it is important for facilitators to ensure that each small dialogue group has a good mix of different perspectives. Small groups should ideally be between 8-10 participants to balance diversity with offering all a chance to speak at each station.
- Visits to each station should be approximately 5-10 minutes. This ensures enough time for dialogue and sense-making, but lessens the likelihood groups will move too quickly to finding “solutions.”
- Post-its at each station can be used to capture and share the insights from each small group and each small group should also be offered a chance to reflect together about the entire experience before debriefing the exercise as a whole group. In Rockford, once the data walk was complete, each small group was asked to reflect on two questions and then draw a picture to share the highlights of their discussion. The two questions were :
 - Identify possible contributions that parents, kids and non-educational organizations or programs could make to support 3rd graders to read at or above grade level; and,
 - What systems and/or policy changes might be needed to support 3rd grades to read at or above grade level and who should address them?

To debrief this dialogue each group then posted their picture of highlights and all were invited to circulate and view the pictures.

Using a Data Walk as part of the early action planning of Rockford’s community-wide effort to ensuring all the community’s 3rd Graders are reading at or above grade level was a valuable and engaging way to build understanding and engagement across a diverse array of stakeholders and provided a rich opportunity for dialogue that enabled participants to: share their own knowledge and connection to the issue; appreciate an array of contributing factors; consider a range of possible solutions and build shared ownership for the issue. Overall it helped to create a strong foundation for mobilizing the entire community to work together and help ensure every child in Rockford is supported to achieve academic success.

LEARN MORE:

Read [Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities](#) by the Urban Institute’s to learn more about how to design and host a data walk.