



**Black Hills Reads  
2018-2020 Systems Change Report**

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Commissioned by:

Black Hills Reads, a project of the United Way of the Black Hills

**Benchmark Data Labs**

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## The Problem and Opportunity

Many nonprofits, businesses, schools, and individuals are committed to early learning and literacy in the Black Hills region. This system, however, is complex which makes it difficult for early learning entities to be aware of other organizations and their programs, form partnerships, identify common problems, and work collaboratively for solutions. Furthermore, early learning entities face limited funding opportunities which incentivizes individualistic competition for attention, grants, and participation.

Black Hills Reads (BH Reads), a program of the United Way of the Black Hills (UWBH) and formerly known as the Black Hills Campaign for Grade Level Reading, leverages its flexible role to breakdown industry silos, to streamline and improve collaborations, and ultimately to strengthen the systems that serve early learners and their families. As an engaged backbone organization and funder, BH Reads promotes early learning and literacy opportunities for the 22,718 early learners under 9 and their families in Butte, Custer, Fall River, Lawrence, Meade, and Pennington Counties, though their work also impacts children across South Dakota.

This report provides a systems-change analysis utilizing an appreciative inquiry approach. The analysis shows how BH Reads, along with others, changed the regional early-learning system. Systems-change analysis identifies how organizations change important system attributes such as boundaries, relationships, perspectives, conditions of self-organization, or exchanges.<sup>1</sup> The timeline on the following page and the narrative that follows showcase how BH Reads built bridges to catalyze regional action and how this, in turn, created statewide ripples. This report is not a comprehensive summary of all BH Reads activities from 2018 to 2020, though. Rather, the appreciative inquiry approach allows us to focus on the largest system ripples created or amplified by BH Reads.

Organizations focused on early learning in South Dakota have limited capacity, even in the best of times. Many are underfunded, understaffed, limited to specific focus areas, and/or have complex decision-making bodies. BH Reads provides a space for these organizations to identify and address common goals without needing to compete for resources. BH Reads convenes discussions and collaborative work for advocacy, pilot programs, special events, and even offers additional grants to help partner organizations achieve these goals. BH Reads supports and promotes these efforts by helping partners identify action steps and resources to make them happen.

BH Reads is managed by program director Kayla Klein. Hired in May 2018, Kayla was previously the director of the Northern Hills Alliance for Children and managed their full-time preschool program and child care services. As BH Reads director, Kayla manages activities, relationships, and grant opportunities with BH Reads partners. Partners shared that having Kayla as a consistent and passionate point person with real-life experience (she spent 8 years as the director of the Northern Hills Alliance for Children) helps bring people together and maintain momentum not just for BH Reads but for early learning work at all levels.

## Early Learner Rapid City

**Nov 2018**  
Rapid City Mayor  
Allender attends  
"No Small Matter "  
at NLC conference

**Feb 2019**  
Rapid City hosts  
screening of "No  
Small Matter "

**March 2019**  
Rapid City adopts  
NLC Early Learner  
Community Toolkit  
as ELRC

**Dec 2020**  
Mayor's Office  
hands ELRC  
activities to Rapid  
City Public Library

## Early Learner South Dakota

**Dec 2018**  
MAPLE hosts  
statewide early  
learner stakeholder  
meeting

**May 2019**  
ELRC group  
launches public  
page on ELSD  
website

**Sept 2019**  
BH Reads adapts  
NLC toolkit for  
smaller  
communities

**May 2020**  
BH Reads awards  
first Early Learner  
Toolkit Grant to ELLD

**Oct 2020**  
Betty Jo Huff  
develops "The First  
Strawberries"  
curriculum for  
childcare providers

## Early Learner Lead Deadwood

**Sept 2019**  
Lead Deadwood  
hosts screening of  
"No Small Matter"

**October 2019**  
Early Learner Lead  
Deadwood forms  
and adopts BH  
Reads Toolkit

**May 2020**  
Northern Hills  
Alliance for  
Children becomes  
ELLD backbone

**June 2020**  
NHAC hires  
Betty Jo Huff as  
Early Learning  
Associate

**Jan 2019**  
*Porter the Hoarder*  
published. Author  
contacts BH Reads  
about forming pilot  
program

**Feb 2019**  
BH Reads launches  
*Porter the Hoarder*  
Reading Initiative

**Sept 2019**  
Statewide Family  
Engagement  
Center launches  
program statewide

**Jan 2020**  
Program reaches  
2,400 students in  
81 classrooms  
statewide

**Oct 2020**  
BH Reads asks  
SDPB for Day of  
Caring donation

**Nov 2020**  
SDPB donates  
professional "The  
First Strawberries"  
recording for  
curriculum toolkit

## Porter the Hoarder Pilot

**Oct 2020**  
Program reaches  
9,400 students,  
translated into  
Spanish and ASL

**Dec 2020**  
Program orders  
14,000 books for  
2021 rollout

**Jan 2020**  
Covid-19 pandemic  
begins

## Covid-19 Response

**Mar 2020**  
Covid-19 pandemic  
hits South Dakota

**Apr 2020**  
BH Reads partners  
with NAEYC on  
Childcare Covid-19  
Impact Survey

**June 2020**  
BH Reads launches  
Covid-19 Slide  
Grants for child  
care providers

**Jul 2020**  
BH Reads facilitates  
meeting with Senator  
Thune and child care  
providers

**Aug 2020**  
BH Reads awards  
Early Learning  
Innovation Grants

**Sept 2020**  
Elevate Rapid City  
releases Childcare  
Provider Grants

**Dec 2020**  
CDBG makes  
CARES Act funding  
available to child  
care providers

## Systems Change Highlights

BH Reads implemented a number of strategies to strengthen the relationships and address barriers in the early learning system. The following sections exemplify the important and multi-faceted role BH Reads holds. The first section showcases how BH Reads connected boots-on-the-ground early learning expertise with Rapid City leaders focused on creating sustained early learning efforts. The second shows how BH Reads strengthened statewide initiatives by focused early learning policy work. The third section reveals how BH Reads catalyzed grassroots commitment in Lead Deadwood through their Early Learning toolkit, which led to the creation of a new job and early learning curriculum. The fourth section shares how BH Reads piloted a reading program which, after less than a year, became a statewide reading initiative. The final section focuses on how BH Reads sustained early learning environments during the Covid-19 pandemic by advocating for and providing needed funding opportunities.

Each section contains a call out box summary of the key system barriers BH Reads helped address along with tangible outputs and intended outcomes. They are formatted as follows:

**Barrier:**

The relationships/barriers/disconnects that inhibit smooth collaboration on early learning initiatives

**Black Hills Read Role:**

The key roles Black Hills Reads held to address the barrier

**Output:**

Tangible resources, activities, or relationships created or strengthened by Black Hills Reads

**Outcome:**

What short-term changes are expected from the outputs and relationships supported by Black Hills Reads.

## Connecting Experience with Capacity for Change

Early Learner Rapid City (EL Rapid City) is an example of how BH Reads, along with other key stakeholders, worked collectively to achieve a common mission: bolster awareness of and support for early learning in Rapid City. This work also informed other regional and statewide efforts to address these needs.

During the fall of 2018, Mayor of Rapid City Steve Allender attended the National League of Cities (NLC) Conference and attended a showing of the film “No Small Matter”. This film screening served as the introduction and first step for cities interested in implementing the NLC Early Learning Community Action Guide.<sup>2</sup> Mayor Allender returned to Rapid City eager to schedule the film screening and follow through the rest of the action guide. Meanwhile, other early learning stakeholders in Rapid City including BH Reads, South Dakota Association for the Education of Young Children (SDAEYC), Early Childhood Connections, and the John T. Vucurevich Foundation were also working to grow support and awareness of early learning. Knowing that city staff lacked first-hand know-how and connections, the City reached out to stakeholders to learn what was already underway in the community and how the city could play a stronger, lead role.

**Barrier:**

Leadership and funding entities are siloed from early learning professionals and experts who hold valuable first-hand experience

**BH Reads Role:**

Participator, Connector, First Hand Knowledge Holder

**Output:**

Early Learner Rapid City

**Outcome:**

Sustained commitment to early learning in Rapid City, informed by direct practitioners

Eager to avoid duplication or competition, these stakeholder groups joined to begin work as Early Learner Rapid City.<sup>3</sup> They hosted two public screenings of the film *No Small Matter* in February 2019. Now approaching its third year, EL Rapid City boasts five sub-committees, over 50 key stakeholders, and holds quarterly meetings. The group has created a mission statement, has an online web and social media presence (currently housed on the Early Learner South Dakota website), and recently launched an early-learner community outreach survey.

During interviews, partners agreed that BH Reads played a significant, multi-faceted role in this work. BH Reads leveraged its existing relationships with child care providers, early learning programs, and other community partners to make sure a diverse set of stakeholders were at the table. This imbued EL Rapid City discussions with boot-on-the-ground experience.

Furthermore, BH Reads connected local work with statewide efforts. SDAEYC has a focus very similar to the work of Rapid City but with a statewide focus. Since these efforts are occurring simultaneously, both groups work together to maintain consistent messaging, branding, and marketing. This reduces duplication and unintended mixed-messaging.

*“Without Black Hills Reads we wouldn’t be as far along as we are. Without Kayla neither Early Learner Rapid City or Early Learner South Dakota would be as involved or engaged as they are. Her passion and knowledge sell the [importance of early learning].”*

But how does this work definitively change a system? Early Learner Rapid City proposed the establishment of an Early Learning Committee. EL Rapid City committees drafted bylaws and a committee MOU that, if adopted by the Rapid City council, would formalize the relationship between EL Rapid City and the city of Rapid City. This would have ensured that the work and partnerships fostered by Early Learner Rapid City and its partners will remain a focus and priority for the city regardless of mayoral or staff turnover. However, political winds and staff shifted near the end of 2020, making this plan no longer feasible. Faced with increasing community polarization, policy makers feared that early learning work would become politicized if addressed through the city council. Committed to finding a sustainable home for this work, the group approached the Rapid City Public Library. As of December 2020, library staff will help facilitate this work and will hire an Early Learning Librarian in 2021. Though perhaps not as politically formalized, this effort ensures that city staff continue to be meaningfully engaged in this work.

## Providing Backbone Support for Policy Change

Organized commitment to early childhood education is nothing new in South Dakota. Many grassroots groups have emerged and disbanded over the years. Early Learner South Dakota (EL South Dakota) is one of the most recent statewide initiatives to arise. Members shared that Early Learner South Dakota feels different than previous strategies, thanks, in part, to the role played by BH Reads.

Through EL South Dakota, BH Reads along with others, are building the necessary conditions for meaningful policy change. BH Reads and its partners acknowledge that this type of change happens slowly, built upon a foundation of mutual understanding and trust between the early learning community and regional political bodies like city government and the South Dakota state legislature.

EL South Dakota emerged from the convergence of a number of key stakeholders, one of which was BH Reads. In 2018, John Swanson, Director of Midwest MAPLE, convened a large group of early learner stakeholders to discuss the need for joint leadership to increase awareness of early learning needs in South Dakota. At this meeting, then President of SDAEYC, Jessica Castleberry, announced that SDAEYC received a grant from their parent organization NAEYC to do just that. They received a \$25,000 grant for a one-year period. SDAEYC used this money to establish the Early Learner South Dakota brand and convene stakeholders under this banner. The newly minted Early Learner South Dakota group then met again in April 2019 and broke into three working committees: Marketing, Public Policy/Advocacy, and Data. Kayla Klein of BH Reads worked as the Marketing committee chair for the first year and moved to the Policy/Advocacy committee chair in January, while also maintaining co-chair in the marketing committee.

Previous early learning initiatives intended to address system barriers were weakened by a lack of consistent funding, structure, capacity to move forward, and stakeholder commitment. EL South Dakota, according to some participants, is better positioned than previous initiatives towards making systems change in South Dakota. Key strengths include:

- **Dedicated funding.** SDAEYC and BH Reads secured over \$75,000 to fund this initiative.
- **Assigning structure by organization not individuals.** In previous efforts, when an individual dropped out, the organization was lost.
- **Public facing website.**<sup>4</sup> This allows the group to reinforce consistent messaging, promote activities and share information with a broad audience.
- **Creation of toolkits.** BH Reads translated complex, phased work plans to something digestible and feasible for smaller communities
- **Tangible Action steps for committees.**

BH Reads was a key partner in the work above. As with many statewide initiatives, many participants go above and beyond their full-time job to meet with the group, some even needing to take time off of work so as not to use employer funding in a potential political role. BH Reads contribution is significant as Kayla Klein is not only allowed but encouraged to put BH Reads time and resources behind this work. This helps address previously existing barriers as BH Reads can serve as a consistent organizer, connector and advocate.

### **Barrier:**

Statewide early learning initiatives were historically unsustainable due to political pressures, lack of funding and structure

### **BH Reads Role:**

Resource Collector, Cheerleader, Funding Securer, Advocate

### **Output:**

Early Learner South Dakota  
Early Learner Toolkit

### **Outcome:**

Sustained statewide collaboration on  
Early Learning

BH Reads is also able to apply for and disseminate funding. In 2020, BH Reads partnered with SDAEYC and received another \$25,000 grant from the Alliance for Early Success for advocacy and policy efforts. This organization not only helps to fund EL South Dakota work but also connects EL South Dakota to significant national partners that leverage their resources and national connections to strengthen the local and national profile of ELSD.

BH Reads is also uniquely positioned to be a political advocate for Early Learner South Dakota's mission. EL South Dakota members and their wide variety of experiences make them powerfully astute in identifying policy barriers that prevent early learning initiatives from success. However, Many EL South Dakota members are barred from advocating for policies at the local and/or state level. For example, a state employee cannot, in their professional capacity, publicly endorse or lobby for a policy. Employees of philanthropic organizations are also limited in their ability to advocate for policy change. BH Reads has no such limitations. BH Reads serves to advocate for policies agreed upon by the group and has the freedom to lobby for them.

In 2021, BH Reads and other EL South Dakota stakeholders will hold a virtual early learning public policy forum. The public policy forum will consist of two primary tracks, one for elected officials and one for early learner allies and advocates. EL South Dakota hopes that this will not only connect early learning experts directly to policy makers, but convey the importance of early learning and inspire more advocates around SD to take up the torch with EL South Dakota as they move forward.

BH Reads helps EL South Dakota maintain momentum towards shared early learning goals statewide. BH Reads contributes paid staff time to expand access and advocacy statewide. The following section will show in greater detail how BH Reads ensures that larger statewide goals are realized at the community level as well.

## Amplifying Grassroots Commitment to Early Learning

BH Reads fostered conditions that grew into a statewide partnership between a community early learning initiative, a preschool teacher, and South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

In 2019, BH Reads saw the opportunity to expand the early learner community concept. Thinking smaller towns and cities might be overwhelmed by the original scope of the National League of Cities Early Learning Community action guide, BH Reads translated the document into a simplified toolkit.<sup>5</sup> This revised toolkit gave communities clear, phased action steps with associated activities and intended outcomes, better suited to less populous communities.

BH Reads staff worked with partners in Lead Deadwood to accomplish phase 1 of the toolkit: a public screening of the film *No Small Matter* in September of 2019. This film made the case for early learning to the public and helped recruit community stakeholders. BH Reads assumed associated costs for the screening. Community members then facilitated the remaining phases with stakeholders from city government, business, and the nonprofit sector, relying on BH Reads for structure and accountability. This

**Barrier:**

Smaller communities lack resources to implement early learning initiatives and sustain momentum

**BH Reads Role:**

Toolkit maker, convener, accountability provider, funder

**Output:**

Early Learner Lead Deadwood  
Born Learning Trail  
"The First Strawberries" Activity

**Outcome:**

Sustained, community-based effort to support early learning, Amplify existing success

group formed as Early Learner Lead Deadwood (EL Lead Deadwood).

This group identified a lack of early learning activities for children in the area. EL Lead Deadwood then established Born Learning Trails in both Lead and Deadwood. The Born Learning trail, a concept popularized by the national United Way in 2005, is a “series of 10 interactive signs that offer fun, active learning activities for young children and their families. It helps parents, caregivers and communities create quality engagement opportunities when out on a stroll or visiting a local playground.”<sup>6</sup>

Partners suggest that BH Reads involvement with EL Lead Deadwood sets it apart from previous early learning initiatives. BH Reads ensured that EL Lead Deadwood was an organized, funded response to community needs. Partners feel that having a national known entity like United Way backing their efforts and sharing resources has made it easier to formalize partnerships in the community and maintain momentum. Partners acknowledge that grassroots efforts have always existed but that BH Reads raises them to a stronger position.

As discussed in the previous section, BH Reads was instrumental in establishing EL Lead Deadwood. To ensure the group could sustain their mission, BH Reads asked Northern Hills Alliance for Children to become the anchor partner for the organization. The Northern Hills Alliance for Children manages the First Step Childcare Center, a licensed center child care center in Deadwood, South Dakota. As the ELLD anchor organization, they would be eligible for sustaining grants to continue their mission. Though hesitant at first, the grant successfully enticed NHAC to this role. They received a grant for \$25,000 over two years to support the hire of an Early Learning Associate, one who would contribute 75% of their time to the center and 25% to EL Lead Deadwood. NHAC hired Betty Jo Huff to fill this position in mid-2020, a regional author with years of experience in literacy and early childhood.

Soon after being hired, Betty Jo began work on a new project that leveraged BH Reads resources to create new early learning activities for the community. BH Reads is the anchor entity for the distribution of Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library books in the Black Hills. Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library gifts free books to children from birth to age five in participating communities.<sup>7</sup> One such book is “The First Strawberries”, a retelling of a Cherokee story. Inspired to create more resources for early learners for Native American Day, Betty Jo used this book to build out dozens of activities for early learners of all ages and their caregivers. Lessons align with early learning pillars including social/emotional learning and fine motor skills and can be used in formal or informal child care settings.

BH Reads funding of this position not only allowed Betty Jo paid time to develop this work, but also helped her build connections between formalized center-based child care centers and informal, unregistered family day cares. These groups historically have few opportunities to work together as unregistered family day cares are precluded from state sponsored resources through the Department of Social Services. Betty Jo took this project to the public, training both larger child care centers and unregistered family day cares on how to use the lessons for various age groups. Betty Jo shared this project with BH Reads early fall of 2020.

BH Reads, impressed with the depth and breadth of this project, leveraged their relationship with South Dakota Public Broadcasting (SDPB) to broaden the audience and resulting impact of this work. BH Reads asked SDBP to contribute to the United Way Day of Caring. Their gift to families and early learners was a video presentation of “The First Strawberries” book. SDPB used their recording studio and staff to generate a professional narration video of the First Strawberry book. Inspired by the ease and content, SDPB has now committed to producing a monthly video like this for early learners across the state.

The above illustrates how BH Reads amplifies the success of local movements. BH Reads adaptation of the League of City’s Early Learner toolkit led to the creation of EL Lead Deadwood. BH Reads then funded an Early Learner position at the EL Lead Deadwood anchor organization Northern Hills Alliance for Children.



This led to the hiring of Betty Jo Huff as Early Learner Associate. As such, she created The First Strawberries Early Learning activities which was adopted statewide by SDPB. BH Reads served as a constant partner, helping to streamline how work can happen in a community and how it can be connected to a larger, statewide audience.

## Piloting Programs that Lead to Statewide Impacts

Another way in which BH Reads strengthens early learning systems is by piloting programs that, if successful, are handed off to organizations who otherwise would not have had the resources or flexibility to build a new program from scratch. One such program is the Porter the Hoarder Reading and Family Engagement initiative.

In 2019, South Dakota natives author Sean Covey, illustrator Rebecca Swift, and graphic designer Laurel Antonmarchi published a new children's book "Porter the Hoarder". Covey approached Kayla Klein at BH Reads to investigate ways in which the book could be used to engage young readers and families. BH Reads staff explained the link between engaged readers, family reading habits, grade-level reading and the long term benefits they offer.

**Barrier:**

Few organizations can afford to take risks on new pilot program or have the expertise/flexibility to expand an activity to a larger audience

**BH Reads Role:**

Incubator, Promoter, Funder, Connector

**Output:**

Porter the Hoarder Reading and Family Engagement Initiative

**Outcome:**

Increased access to easy to use resources for statewide early learning and literacy engagement

Already involved with literacy efforts like Imagination Library and the South Dakota Humanities Council Young Reader One Book Festival, BH Reads became the home and co-creator of a new pilot program called the Porter the Hoarder Reading and Family Engagement Initiative. BH Reads used their existing relationships with schools across the Black Hills to secure voluntary participation from elementary schools. BH Reads staff put together implementation toolkits to guide participating schools as they launched the program. By January, 81 classrooms across the Black Hills received over 2,400 copies of Porter the Hoarder, paid for by BH Reads, along with supporting curriculum and a chance to meet the author.

But the program wasn't done expanding. In November 2020, BH Reads handed off the program to the South Dakota Statewide Family Engagement Center (SDSFEC) who took it statewide. BH Reads provided warm handoffs and introductions to Black Hills Area Schools

while SDSFEC forged new relationships with schools on the other side of the state. By November 2020 it reached over 9,400 across the state. The program, under the direction of SDSFEC, has only grown. Staff purchased 14,000 books to distribute in 2021. Program elements have been translated into Spanish and American Sign Language, further broadening the program's reach.

*Kayla Klein and Jamie Toennies, from Black Hills Reads and The United Way of the Black Hills, really helped me understand the scope of the issue and the long-term ramifications of missing both [grade level reading proficiency and family reading habits]. It just so happened that Porter addressed those issues. Entirely by coincidence. The book is a game and the game is a book that Bigs and Littles read and play together.*

– Sean Covey<sup>8</sup>

SDSFEC staff shared that having a tested and piloted program helped them engage new audiences in their statewide engagement efforts. The program's fanfare and previous success in the Black Hills also helped open the door for the SDSFEC to engage with new schools.

## Sustaining Early Learning Environments Focus During the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic began impacting South Dakota child care providers as early as March 2020. Many child care providers placed all their focus on simply keeping their doors open and their staff and children safe. Most did not have the time, capacity, or connections to be part of the larger conversations about how the industry could weather the pandemic storm. BH Reads assumed this role in a number of ways. First by drawing attention to the problem through national participation in an NAEYC survey and hosting child care provider networking events, disseminating South Dakota-specific findings, amplifying child care provider voices at the federal level, and even securing funding for providers above and beyond what was already available.

In April 2020, the National Association for the Education of Young Children conducted a nationwide survey to investigate the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on child care. BH Reads partnered with SDAEYC to distribute the survey in South Dakota which helped generate 215 responses from South Dakota providers. BH Reads employed Benchmark Data Labs to analyze the survey responses.<sup>9</sup>

**Barrier:**

Covid-19 pandemic severely weakened early learning entities, specifically child care providers

**BH Reads Role:**

Fundraiser, Collector and Distributor Resources, Advocate

**Output:**

Funding for Black Hills child care providers

**Outcome:**

Child care providers stayed afloat during the pandemic

This survey generated meaningful data that revealed the fragility of child care providers across the state. Many reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused severe disruption to their operations. For example, 26% of providers closed during the first month of the pandemic, many of whom continued to pay their employees even though income was limited. The survey data also showed how insufficient the first round of CARES Act funding was at protecting these providers from long-term damage or closure.

Driven to action, BH Reads worked with NAEYC to orchestrate a discussion of the child care provider experience and data with SD Senator and Majority Whip John Thune's office. Five regional child care providers were each given three minutes to explain how the pandemic affected their business and what they would like the federal government to address with a new stimulus package. BH Reads directly connected child care providers with influential federal decision makers, ensuring that their voices were heard.

Though federal stimulus talks slowed to a crawl in late 2020, BH Reads continued advocating for pandemic funding for child care providers locally. They leveraged the survey results to convince both public and private entities to fund child care providers. Rapid City allocated CARES Act funds, secured through the Community Development Block Grant program, to child care providers. Elevate Rapid City also released zero-interest loans of up to \$12,500 for child care providers.<sup>10</sup> Elevate also worked with BH Reads to do Q&A Facebook Live sessions to make these loans more transparent to providers who might have been hesitant to participate in such a program.

BH Reads also began their own grant programs to fill pandemic-related funding gaps. Bolstered by testimony shared during a BH Reads Child care networking event, BH Reads released a Covid-19 Slide Grant.

This funding opportunity aimed at helping child care and early learning providers address immediate early learning needs related to the pandemic. For example, an entity shared that providers saw an increase in biting as a symptom of pandemic stress in children. This group then secured this grant funding to expand social/emotional training for biting. Overall, 12 grants totaling \$22,000 were given out.<sup>11</sup> BH Reads also built on the success of this grant opportunity to launch a fall early learning innovation grant, received by three organizations in 2020.

## **Conclusion**

Some early learning needs cannot be met without meaningful policy change. Others cannot be addressed without sustained funding. Others cannot continue without constant relationship building and collaboration. And some, in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, cannot be addressed until the unthinkable happens. BH Reads strengthens the Black Hills and South Dakota early learning system by providing a backbone staff and funding that addresses all these needs. Most importantly, BH Reads served as the connective tissue between hyper local, regional, and statewide initiatives, ensuring that stakeholders were not only aware of but engaged in collaborative systems change.

BH Reads is tangibly supportive and involved in systems-change collaborations, which will ultimately better position organizations to address system barriers to early learning. This not only impacts the organizations who work in this sphere, but the thousands of early learners and their families in South Dakota.

## **Background**

In 2014, the United Way of the Black Hills (UWBH) became the regional hub for the Campaign for Grade Level Reading.<sup>12</sup> This initiative focused on helping young learners achieve grade level reading proficiency by the third grade. According to their website the campaign focuses on “on helping communities and policymakers promote school readiness and quality teaching, tackle chronic absence, and improve summer learning, as well as engage parents as their children’s first teachers.” UWBH implemented working groups, committees, and outreach activities based on this model. After three years, UWBH decided to implement lessons-learned to rebrand the initiative. In 2017, UWBH received a grant from the John T. Vucurevich Foundation to expand and re-launch the Rapid City Campaign for Grade Level Reading as BH Reads.

Also, in 2018, United Way of the Black Hills hired Benchmark Data Labs (then doing business as the Black Hills Knowledge Network) to evaluate the efficacy of the BH Reads Program. Benchmark Data Labs provided BH Reads with annual internal evaluation reports in December of 2018 and 2019. In 2020, Benchmark Data Labs suggested that a systems-change approach be implemented. The United Way of the Black Hills commissioned this report as part of a larger evaluation of the BH Reads Program. This report is a culmination of three years of work along with the following methodological approach.

## **Methods**

We used an appreciative inquiry approach to measure if and how BH Reads contributed to or influenced local and statewide early learning initiatives. Semi-structured stakeholder interviews and primary documentation analysis informed this report. Interviews investigated how BH Reads, along with others, changed the conditions and dynamics of various early learning discussions and initiatives. They also helped Benchmark Data Labs better understand how different organizations viewed their relationship with BH Reads and how this relationship informed their work.

## Acknowledgements

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- Carmen Stewart – Executive Director, South Dakota Head Start Association
- Jessica Gromer – Program Officer, John T. Vucurevich Foundation
- Kayla Klein – Director, Black Hills Reads
- Kelsey Sakos – Project Manager, Mayor of Rapid City Office
- Kevin Nelson – Early Learning Specialist, South Dakota Public Broadcasting
- Morgan VonHaden – Project Director, South Dakota Statewide Family Engagement Center

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Margaret Hargreaves. *Evaluating Systems Change: A Planning Guide*. Mathematica Policy Research. <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/evaluating-system-change-a-planning-guide>
- <sup>2</sup> National League of Cities Early Learning Community Action Guide. <https://www.nlc.org/initiative/early-learning-nation/>
- <sup>3</sup> Early Learner Rapid City Website. <https://www.earlylearnersd.org/rapid-city>
- <sup>4</sup> Early Learner South Dakota About Us. <https://www.earlylearnersd.org/campaign>
- <sup>5</sup> Early Learner Toolkit created by Black Hills Reads. <https://www.earlylearnersd.org/toolkit>
- <sup>6</sup> United Way Born Learning Trails Project. <https://www.bornlearning.org/trails>
- <sup>7</sup> Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Program. <https://imaginationlibrary.com/>
- <sup>8</sup> Jaci Conrad Pearson. *Hollywood producer pens children's book, morphs into statewide literacy promotion tool*. Black Hills Pioneer. [https://www.bhpioneer.com/local\\_news/hollywood-producer-pens-children-s-book-morphs-into-statewide-literacy-promotion-tool/article\\_262e1c2e-d672-11e9-93cd-dbf8f11fe390.html](https://www.bhpioneer.com/local_news/hollywood-producer-pens-children-s-book-morphs-into-statewide-literacy-promotion-tool/article_262e1c2e-d672-11e9-93cd-dbf8f11fe390.html)
- <sup>9</sup> Analysis of NAEYC South Dakota Child Care Provider Survey on the Impact of Covid-19. Benchmark Data Labs. <https://www.benchmarkdatalabs.org/2020/07/naeyc-sd-child-care-provider-survey-on-the-impact-of-covid-19/>
- <sup>10</sup> Elevate Rapid City Child Care Loan Resources. <https://elevaterapidcity.com/resources/child-care-loan>
- <sup>11</sup> *Black Hills Reads Distributes \$22,000 in Innovative Grants to Local Libraries and Child Care Organizations*. United Way of the Black Hills. <https://www.unitedwayblackhills.org/black-hills-reads-distributes-22000-innovative-grants-local-libraries-and-child-care-organizations>
- <sup>12</sup> About the Campaign for Grade Level Reading. <https://gradelevelreading.net/>