

# Library Investments = Community Impacts

## From Last in the State to 100% Grade-Level Reading

In 2012, the Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL) replaced its more than 50-year-old branch in Warrensville Heights, Ohio, with a new building that immediately generated a dramatic increase in use—visits to the branch and circulation both doubled in the first year after opening.

When the Library discovered that the Warrensville Heights School District had the lowest score on the state's third grade reading assessment in 2013, CCPL immediately developed an intervention program to address this key literacy milestone. The new branch's expanded youth space and increased number of public computers made it possible to launch 1-2-3 Read, an after-school reading tutoring program for 1st and 2nd grade students. By 2019, the trajectory for young students in Warrensville Heights completely changed—100% of the district's third graders passed the state reading assessment. "We could not have designed and delivered these programs if we didn't have this building," said CCPL Director Tracy Strobel.

### BACKGROUND

Warrensville Heights is a city where the median household income is \$38,433 and a majority of its population (91.7%) is Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The previous Warrensville Heights library branch was more than 50 years old and ill-equipped to provide the services its community needed: it lacked space for technology and programming, and the space the library did have was dark, crowded, and filled with outdated infrastructure. The roof also needed repairs. As Strobel noted, these deficits "creat[ed] inequity



**Additional public computers and a flexible training room ensure residents no longer have to wait 30 minutes or more for technology access.**



between citizens of Warrensville Heights and citizens in other communities.” Another major deficit was that the library lacked flexibility to address future concerns: “If there’s one prevalent theme with libraries in the past 20 years, it’s that they’re constantly changing and adapting, and the old building just didn’t allow us to do that,” Strobel noted.

To create libraries to best meet community needs, CCPL created a Library Facilities Master Plan that included 24 branch renovation and replacement projects. The \$110 million capital investment was funded through the sale of bonds (\$75 million), the Library’s capital savings (\$25 million) and private donations (\$10 million). CCPL also benefited from then-Mayor Marcia Fudge’s offer of public land to build on. The combination of public and private resources and a shared vision for a new community “town center” with the library and YMCA enabled the Warrensville Heights project to rise to the top of the priority list of facility improvements.

**“We could not have designed and delivered these programs if we didn’t have this (new) building.”**

CUYAHOGA COUNTY  
PUBLIC LIBRARY DIRECTOR  
TRACY STROBEL

## **COMMUNITY IMPACTS**

With strong community relations and partnerships, public libraries are able to positively impact their community in many areas, like education. In 2013, the Warrensville Heights school district had the lowest third grade reading scores in the state. To help raise scores, the Warrensville Heights library branch partnered with the local school district to develop the 1-2-3 Read intervention program. At-risk children received one-on-one reading tutoring sessions at the library and engaged in small group activities to strengthen literacy skills. More than 95% of participants demonstrate improved reading skills. This helped bring Warrensville Heights from having the lowest third-grade reading scores in the state to have 100% of their third graders reading at grade level by the end

Students explore nature and learn about nutrition in the library's community garden and family engagement programs.



of the 2018–2019 academic year (students were not assessed in the 2019–2020 academic year due to the pandemic). The program's success would not have been possible in the library's old branch, which lacked adequate power outlets for charging devices, let alone the dedicated tutoring and technology areas necessary for a program of this size.

Throughout the challenges of the pandemic, the new branch continues to boost community learning through broadband access. "A city like Warrensville Heights has a huge digital divide," Strobel remarked. "Many of the students dropped off and were not reachable, not participating (in remote learning)." Thanks to the library's dedicated computer lab in the youth area, the library was able to address these learning challenges by hosting a learning pod that offers equipment and bandwidth to up to 20 children at a time.

The larger space of the new Warrensville Heights branch also allowed the library to become a "community living room" that strengthens communal and family bonds—and various literacies, too. With more space came more programs in which residents could connect with each other, such as the "Garden with a Librarian" literacy program and a family-oriented culinary literacy program. The impact of all these programs are reflected not only in stronger local bonds, but in overall library visits as well: compared to the old library building, the new library building saw double the number of visits (120% increase) and circulation (106% increase) and growth in the number of community members participating in library programs.

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## CONCLUSION

Warrensville Heights' library and community are illustrative of the needs and opportunities for library infrastructure investments across the nation. Many communities of color and low-income communities lag in their ability to secure needed public and private funding for capital improvements, as well as disproportionately experiencing the digital divide. One in three families who earn less than \$50,000 annually lack high-speed home internet. The same percentage is true of Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native families (Horrigan, 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated and further entwined the inequitable educational and economic opportunities inherent in the digital divide. As the Warrensville Heights branch shows, modern library facilities can help level the playing field and strengthen community connections for all.

While CCPL did their own share of fundraising and saving to create a Warrensville Heights branch that was better equipped to serve their community, they were greatly helped by dedicated operating funds from the state and local property tax revenue. Without the efficiency of this government collaboration, the people of Warrensville Heights would have had to wait much longer to have their needs met. More distressingly, they might not have been met at all. Federal infrastructure funding for library projects would speed critical capital upgrades, boost local building jobs, and expand equitable learning opportunities for all. Because investing in libraries like the Warrensville Heights branch is more than just solving problems in a building, or even ones in a city or town—it's tackling nationwide issues of educational inequality, digital equity, and pandemic recovery. For more success stories across the country, it's time to Build America's Libraries.



## REFERENCES

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