

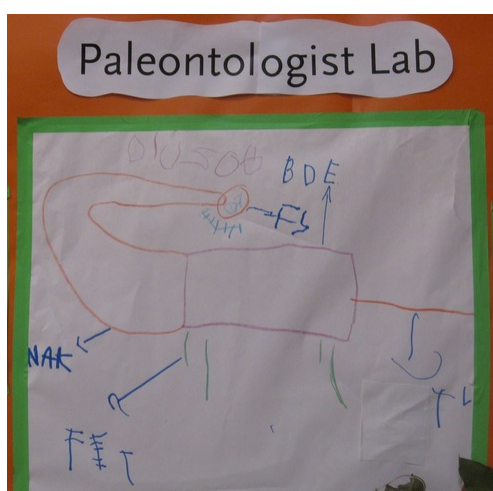
## Closing the Opportunity Gap with ELLI, a Museum-based Preschool

"For many children, what begins as an opportunity gap results in an achievement gap, the difference in educational performance between children from low-income households and their peers in moderate-to-high-income households. Connecticut's achievement gap, shaped by disparities in income levels, language, vocabulary, background knowledge, and opportunity, is one of the largest in the country. **Stepping Stones and Literacy How decided to work together to close that gap.**"\*

### What is ELLI?

When the Early Language and Literacy Initiative (ELLI) Lab School at Stepping Stones Museum for Children opened in December 2012, it cemented a longstanding partnership between the museum, Norwalk Acts, a collective impact initiative, and Literacy How, which provided professional guidance about evidence-based best practices in early language and literacy development.

Today, ELLI offers a comprehensive approach to early childhood education designed to advance the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development of young children, improve school readiness, and reduce the achievement gap. Per CT's School Readiness Initiative regulations, 60% of the children enrolled are from families below a certain income level. This ensures equity and access, and supports ELLI's approach which is best achieved with a mix of students from a broad range of experiences.



### Learning and Teaching the ELLI Way

The ELLI Classroom is an immersive and ever-changing teaching and learning tool. Daily ELLI programs embed language and literacy, STEAM-infused content, and 21st century skill-building opportunities into every learning activity. Classroom "big ideas" or major topics, such as community, global awareness, health, and the environment, are selected annually and tied to museum exhibits and programming. Teachers intentionally link each project throughout the day and the year to these big ideas—building language, vocabulary, background knowledge, and other preliteracy skills.

ELLI teachers, all of whom meet both NAEYC and Connecticut teaching requirements, must learn to deliver more than a standard, prescribed curriculum. They create their own lessons and transform their classrooms into vocabulary and content-rich interdisciplinary learning environments depending on what they're studying—including an international space station, a dinosaur habitat, or a paleontologist's lab.

Most ELLI teachers reach a mastery of the ELLI approach after two to three years in the classroom, and ongoing professional development delivered by ELLI Directors and Literacy How coaches. The coaching focuses on building the teachers' knowledge about language acquisition and its central role in learning to read and write proficiently. They learn to administer and analyze language and literacy assessments to provide data-driven small group instruction.

### The ELLI Research Agenda

The ELLI Research Agenda underpins continuous program and curriculum improvement, assessment, the design and delivery of PD to professionals and families, growth strategies, and program replication. Studies are conducted annually to help answer the primary research question, "What are the optimal conditions for children to learn and grow up successfully?"

In addition to observing teachers in the classroom and documenting program implementation, the research team is studying the relationship between teachers' attitudes about language and literacy skills and their knowledge of theory and pedagogy of teaching children to read, and the children's reading outcomes.

Over the past three years, fall-spring language and literacy assessments administered to each cohort of ELLI children have shown statistically significant growth that goes beyond what is expected for same-age peers. These are important outcome data since one of ELLI's primary goals is to close the opportunity gap.

### ELLI Programs

Since its inception, ELLI programming has expanded to now include:

- The ELLI Lab School at Stepping Stones, serving children ages 18 months through five years.
- ELLI classrooms in three Norwalk elementary schools (with a fourth to open Fall '19), serving children ages three through five years.
- ELLI at Fairfield University, serving children ages 12 weeks through five years.
- Camp ELLI, serving children entering kindergarten with no pre-K experience.
- Norwalk Summer Academy, serving children in kindergarten through fifth grade.

\* This article is adapted from Kiest, R., Matos, C., & Gillis, M. (January 2019). Why Not a Preschool? *Hand to Hand* 32 (2), 5;18;20.

### Read More

Raynolds, L.B., Gillis, M.B., Matos, C., & Delli Carpini, K. (March 2019). Equalizing opportunities to learn. A collaborative approach to language and literacy development in preschool. *Young Children* 74 (1), 22-28.



### Friday, May 10: An Evening to Promote the Science of Reading

If you haven't seen *Disleksia: The Movie*, this is your chance! This event at the historic Warner Theater in Torrington, CT will include a movie screening followed by a panel discussion comprised of reading and learning style experts. Dr. Margie Gillis will head up the panel that will explore best practices in reading instruction, early intervention, and learning differences

detection, and the socio-economic and emotional impacts of marginal reading/illiteracy. Buy tickets and learn more [here](#).

Some free tickets are available for Connecticut teachers and administrators, so act fast! Please e-mail [production@seedling.tv](mailto:production@seedling.tv) to get a sponsored ticket!



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