Literacy and Justice for All (LJFA) is a collaborative effort to support every child in Marietta to reach their fullest reading potential by third grade. Why third grade? That year is when children start to transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” For students who do not read proficiently by third grade, it is hard to catch up—and they are four times more likely to drop out of high school. A community-wide effort to impact reading proficiency will give thousands of children in Marietta a better chance of success in school and in life.

**LJFA Theory of Change**

If child-facing adults have the knowledge, skills, and agency to implement:
- Healthy brain development in perinatal care;
- Language and literacy in birth-to-five care and learning; and
- The Science of Reading instruction in K-3

Then, every child will have the social-emotional and language abilities and literacy skills they need to be on a path to a life of self-determination.

**Science of Reading**

LJFA relies on the Science of Reading to inform instruction. The Science of Reading refers to the extensive body of research on how children learn to read and how explicitly and systematically to teach children to read using evidence-based teaching principles and evidence-based elements of instruction.

Literacy acquisition and the development of the reading brain begins well before children start kindergarten. They rely on the “serve and return” process of vocal and gesturing interactions with parents and caregivers. The early years are important because brains are most flexible during the first years of life—it’s easier and more effective to influence a baby’s developing brain architecture than to rewire it later.

[Watch LJFA in action](#)
Science of Reading in Marietta

In Marietta, the Science of Reading is being shared with children starting at birth. At Wellstar Kennestone Hospital, the staff is implementing Talk With Me Baby, a program that instructs parents and other caregivers on how to be their child’s first teacher. Nurses, pediatricians, and other family-facing staff share skills on how to engage in critical, brain-building conversations with children.

Caregivers at participating daycares, preschools, and early childhood education centers across Marietta are being trained in evidence-based instructional practices rooted in this research, laying the groundwork and helping to “build the reading brain” before they reach kindergarten in Marietta City Schools. Teachers in approximately 20 schools who impact more than 1,000 babies, toddlers, and young children throughout Marietta are a part of this work, participating in professional development and literacy coaching, as well as being provided a culturally preserving, child-honoring curriculum.

Programs such as the United Way's drop-in Learning Spaces program, being delivered in Marietta by the YMCA, further help to supplement the developmental needs of children not served by these formal preschools or child care.

Literacy Ambassadors, working under the auspices of the Cobb Collaborative, help to spread the message about the Science of Reading, and this program, to the wider community.

In Marietta City Schools, we are working to ensure that all our teachers in every classroom, kindergarten through grade 3, have the training needed to be successful in implementing the Science of Reading with their students. Continuous professional development by leading researchers is coupled with coaching by top educators who model how the pedagogy looks in practice. At the district level, tremendous investments of time have led to the necessary changes in instruction, curriculum, and assessments. Teaching resources, trauma-informed training, personnel, and evaluations are all part of the district’s commitment to our elementary school students and staff.

The expectation is for Marietta to be a model that will yield change throughout Atlanta, across Georgia and the Southeast, and ultimately, on a national level. While spring 2023 testing data will show us the true extent of our progress, student outcomes in Marietta show early promise: Kindergarten students learning their letter sounds; second graders increasing their oral reading; third graders improving their oral fluency; greater student engagement levels overall; and self-reporting of stronger classroom instruction.

Marietta City Schools realizes that literacy instruction cannot occur in a vacuum. A community-wide approach is needed to ensure that every child-facing adult better understands how children learn to read and what their role is in that learning. By working together, we can change the trajectory for every classroom and every child in Marietta.

Multiple organizations have come together to create a language-centered ecosystem and learning environment with the goal of improving literacy for Marietta’s children. Led by Marietta City Schools and the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy at the Atlanta Speech School, partners include the above-noted Cobb Collaborative, YMCA, and Wellstar Kennestone Hospital, as well as Quality Care for Children, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, Learn4Life: the Metro Atlanta Regional Education Partnership, UGA College of Education, Kennesaw State University, and Georgia State University.

To date, more than $5 million has been invested throughout the city of Marietta through grant funding to these organizations via the United Way, with support from the Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation.