

Emily: My name is Emily Sok and as of summer, 2024, I am helping to administer the Virginia Community Writing Collaborative website. I'm talking here today with Erica Holmes who is a chief program officer. So Erica, thank you so much again for giving us your time to tell us about your organization today.

Erica: What pleasure is most certainly ours.

Emily: So the first question for you is, can you tell us a little bit about your organization? What does it call them? What does it do?

Erica: Sure. Our organization is called Children's Literacy Initiative. And we support and empower school and systems leaders alongside teachers to facilitate and create the conditions necessary for improving literacy instruction. And this is achieved through an enhanced instructional framework, expert leadership and literacy coaching and a comprehensive evaluation tool that's designed for effective Assessment and Selection of culturally sustaining books, materials and instruction.

Emily: What is the mission statement of your organization?

Erica: We seek to dismantle structural racism by providing black and Latinx children, the antiracist early literacy, instruction, support and advocacy needed to create equity in education.

Emily: What makes the work of your organization necessary?

Erica: Equity has always been at the center of why I feel like this is an organization about 35 years ago we were founded by a librarian and a literacy specialist who believed in equity and the power of access and opportunity for children of color and underserved and marginalized communities. And so, while we began by ensuring that children had access to books in their classrooms, we soon realized that simply providing books wasn't enough to bring about the change in the classroom experience that children deserve. And so we realized we needed to support teachers and understanding how to leverage those books to create different and more equitable learning experiences. Through our work in coaching and developing teachers, we began to understand that in order to realize our vision for dismantling structural racism, we would need to expand our support to both teachers and leaders in order to address the very system that was producing inequitable results. And so we know that leadership in all spaces in places is key to eliminating inequity. And we know that in order to develop teachers, many times we as leaders also have to put on our own learning caps and engage in some of the same learning experiences that we need to create for teachers to support us in effectively leading and coaching teachers and so a part of our work is just that.

Emily: What role does literacy play in your organization or in the community it serves, knowing that the name of your organization is Children's Literacy Initiative?

Erica: Yeah, we have a saying that literacy is liberation, right. We believe that the world opens up for children and communities when they have access to amazing literacy experiences that support them in being critical thinkers and writers and readers and so it's essential to living the life that children dream and deserve.

Emily: And the next question for you is, what misconceptions might there be about the work that

your organization is doing?

Erica: That's a really good question. I think that oftentimes, there's this perception that it's just the teacher coaching that is necessary versus thinking about all of the different levers that support children in experiencing success in school. And so as a matter of fact, this year, we've really expanded our support from teachers and leaders to thinking about community coalition building and engagement because we know that all of those pillars are essential to supporting children to experience success in classrooms. An additional layer of that in terms of teachers, leaders and advocacy. For community and engagement of the community has been considering what books and materials children get to engage with in the classroom. And so we've extended from classroom libraries to really considering what the curriculum is that children get to engage with.

Emily: Thank you for these answers is there anything additional that you might like to share either about your organization about its mission about literacy?

Erica: I think one of my favorite things is our focus this year on really coalition building and thinking of like minded organizations who are doing similar work that we can partner with, and considering different strengths that we bring to the work and how we can support and uplift one another towards our common mission and vision for ensuring equitable access to black and Latinx children and communities.

Emily: Thank you so much for these amazing answers. I think that our viewers are going to be very interested in what you have to say thank you so much for being here today and again for for giving us your time. Thank you so much.