

## GUIDING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH COLORADO'S LIBRARIES: THE EARLY LITERACY INITIATIVE

Public service defines the purpose of libraries. Over a century ago, children became a priority, and libraries began developing special rooms and corners along with activities like story hours to reach their youngest patrons.

Through the years, our leaders and heroes have been quick to credit libraries for helping these individuals achieve their potential. U. S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove says, "My childhood library was small enough not to be intimidating. And yet I felt the whole world was contained in those two rooms. I could walk any aisle and smell wisdom." Actor John Goodman agrees, "My library card was my key to the world."

A recent phenomenon in children's services is the growth of literacy offerings. While not all library staff agree that public libraries should be invested in formal children's literacy programs, most realize change is occurring.

Change can happen without our awareness, or it can transpire with deliberation. When the change process is monitored, planned, and evaluated, we are much more likely to benefit from it. The factors encouraging an emphasis on early literacy (defined as reaching children from birth to about six years) are nationwide. They include research indicating the importance of those early years to brain development and school readiness, a sense of discouragement with results from K-12 education for at-risk children, and increased diversity in the US population.

Libraries, then, are not the originators of early literacy programs. But because of our centrality in communities as well as our dedication to public service, it's natural that we see libraries as players in the collective effort now addressing the country's tiniest residents.

In Colorado, the Colorado State Library (CSL) is part of the Colorado Department of Education, aware and supportive of the department's emphasis on improving student achievement. In June 2003 a conversation between the CSL community outreach staff person and a librarian from a public library who had attended sessions at the American Library Association (ALA) conference convinced both of them that a formal early literacy initiative in the state was both needed and feasible.

The initiative has been like Topsy: it just grew. Three factors set the stage for the project:

- 1) Information on young children's lack of readiness to enter school already existed. In Colorado, in a 2001 Educare survey of kindergarten and first grade teachers, it was found that teachers believed four out of ten children (40%) entering the classroom were not academically prepared to learn.
- 2) The Public Library Association (PLA) and Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) had created Child Ready to Read @your library, complete with training and tools; and,
- 3) CSL was ready to move from the general advocacy and promotional @your library campaign to a project to produce positive change.

Certainly the availability of LSTA funds was the final enabler, for without the initial 2004 grant through CSL, the initiative's impact would have been greatly limited.

We followed a logical process to plan our approach:

1. Determine need (in this case, help young children acquire early literacy skills to create a strong foundation for later reading and school success)
2. Establish methods to help fill the need
3. Do outreach
4. Train and inform people
5. Motivate people
6. Show that promotion and advocacy can produce change, not only in support for early literacy but also to position libraries favorably

Major activities established from the beginning and continued throughout the four years of the initiative's establishment (2004-2008) included:

- Training workshops
- Grant or in-kind support
- Engagement in coalitions and strategic partnerships
- Research and reporting

We began by obtaining an overview of the status of current public library activities in early literacy. We conducted an informal survey to all public library locations in the state and found nearly all offered storytimes and summer reading programs. We also measured attitude—did they feel libraries are or could be leaders in the field. Respondents self-selected but most felt we are or could be important as early literacy providers.

The first year of the project (2004/05) brought the first round of workshops for public library staff. Bringing in a national training from PLA in November and February, the three-hour sessions in seven locations (for a total of about 125 participants), an overview of research and curriculum, were the first exposure for many to the ideas behind Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR.) More information at [www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/ecrr/index.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/ecrr/index.cfm)

During this time, we also addressed several activities to assist in the awareness and outreach. Library staff and the general early education community had frequently mentioned the need for a simple brochure designed for parents and caregivers about kindergarten readiness, one that wasn't too technical or jargon-laden. Using existing research and the expertise of professionals in the field, "Ready, Set, Go. . . Kindergarten Readiness" joined our already popular "Reading Tips for Parents." Both these brochures are available free upon request to Colorado libraries, schools, child care centers, and groups in both English and Spanish (see [www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/Kindergarten\\_Readiness.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/Kindergarten_Readiness.htm); [www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/slreadtips.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/slreadtips.htm))

We provided nearly 25 small grants to libraries to increase their interest in learning about and possibly expanding their children's literacy services to include ECRR trainings and story times. This was helped by a companion grant from the Ceridian/Qwest Family and Work Development Fund, which was used to purchase 16 ECRR kits from PLA/ALSC and distributed to public libraries in various locations and of differing service area populations.

Accompanying the materials was our effort to make libraries more visible in the early childhood community as providers of services and resources. The staff person became heavily involved in an informal group, the Children's Literacy Coalition, as well as a statewide group initiating a comprehensive system of early childhood services modeled after North Carolina's Smart Start. Through another multi-agency group, we made contact with private nonprofits like the Colorado Association for the Education of Young Children and stepped up our visibility by volunteering to present literacy trainings, staff exhibits, and sponsoring a speaker (Judy Stoia, executive producer of PBS's "Between the Lions" show) at a public meeting.

Without formalizing the evaluation process, we would have been unable to determine if progress is being made. From the beginning we depended upon an easy-to-use survey (based upon a model created by the Library Research Service) of workshop participants to help determine results. The standard form measures not only satisfaction with the content and delivery of the workshop itself, but also the likelihood of participants actually changing their behavior by applying their new knowledge, known as "outcomes-based evaluation." Among the findings, following the first round of workshops, respondents indicated:

- Overwhelmingly, they would be very likely (52%) or likely (43%) to change how they provide existing services to better address early literacy.
- Eight in ten respondents (80%) said they were very likely or likely to contact additional community agencies about partnering to better address early literacy.
- Three-fourths of respondents (75%) said they would be very likely or likely train their own staff and volunteers to better address early literacy.

("Training Jumpstarts Early Literacy Service," *Fast Facts* #239. June 8, 2006. M. Claire Williamson. [www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/239\\_Early\\_Lit%20workshop.pdf](http://www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/239_Early_Lit%20workshop.pdf))

For subsequent years, financial support for the initiative was part of the Community Programs budget rather than a separate LSTA grant. However, the first year of support established a strong foundation for our offerings and process. Five or six regional workshop were presented annually, each time taking a different emphasis.

- Year 2: Making community connections that count. Panelists comprised of representatives from community nonprofits discussed the benefits of reaching out in collaborations. We wanted to stress that early literacy services can enhance a library's standing and support within a community as well as provide a needed service. We discovered this concept may be a challenge for beginning ECRR programs to encompass.
- Year 3: Applying ECRR to storytimes. After feedback indicated libraries struggle to plan and market ECRR training for adults, we decided to encourage more realistic initial changes within libraries by applying the concepts of ECRR to existing storytimes.
- Year 4: A broad-brush view of ECRR, brain research, curriculum, storytimes and community connections. Whew! We implemented this approach when we realized that children's services staff in libraries turn over with great regularity. Many in the target audiences again were unfamiliar with ECRR. This year we also included a more intensive six-hour training at the annual Colorado Association of Libraries conference.

On-going research in early 2006 measured quantitatively whether change was occurring over time, due to our initiative. Although it was a challenge to track participants from the first year's trainings, we located a pool and surveyed them. Findings showed that public libraries and librarians throughout the state have earmarked both time and material resources toward enhancing their early literacy programming and services.

- Some 76% said that their library has made changes to existing early literacy services such as storytimes and outreach to parents and caregivers.
- Nearly 85% had contacted and partnered with community agencies (such as childcare centers, preschools, and shelters) to further address early literacy or planned to do so.
- Over half said they personally (or others in their libraries) have trained staff and/or volunteers to address early literacy issues, or were in the process of doing so.
- An overwhelming number of respondents (92%) indicated that their libraries distribute and use early literacy handout materials produced by CSL

The data from this survey and other input demonstrated that training public library staff to support and strengthen early literacy services is paying off. Such data is also enabling the Colorado State Library to improve and refine future training.

("Early Literacy Initiative Impacts Public Library Services for Young Children," *Fast Facts* #237. April 20, 2006. Robbie Bravman Marks. [www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/237\\_Early\\_Literacy\\_.pdf](http://www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/237_Early_Literacy_.pdf))

As our work continued, we realized that evaluation forms were not delivering the whole picture of development of early literacy library services. In-depth feedback and personal opinions through qualitative research can provide real insight as well as direction. Consequently in summer 2006, we identified 13 individuals who through their positions and visibility were in the forefront of early literacy activities. These people's stories, captured and summarized in research how an array of public libraries came to adopt/adapt early literacy services. ("A Closer Look: Early Literacy Programs and Practices at Colorado Public Libraries," October 2006, Robbie Bravman Marks, [www.lrs.org/documents/closer\\_look/early\\_lit.pdf](http://www.lrs.org/documents/closer_look/early_lit.pdf)). Some interesting key findings surfaced during the intensive interviews with the leaders, among them:

- The *Every Child Ready to Read @your library* (ECRR) curriculum has enabled or enhanced their libraries' ability to provide programming and related materials of value to their constituency.
- Positive impacts on programming are attributable to the work of the Colorado State Library and its Early Literacy Initiative.
- Overall, outreach programs have been more likely than in-library programming to reach those who do not regularly patronize public libraries.
- Notwithstanding, interviewees say that publicity and promotion of in house early literacy programs (including word-of-mouth networking) is bringing new patrons into their libraries.
- All leaders adopted and adapted the ECRR curriculum to suit their particular needs and environments. This appears to be the foundation to create an acceptable comfort level for leaders.
- Spanish presentations and materials are a priority for a number of libraries, although they may currently lack the capacity to implement these as fully as desired.

- Promotion for early literacy programming is, in the main, internal, via library organs and word-of-mouth. Rarely can local media be attracted to substantial coverage.
- Roles of these leaders in implementing early literacy programs covered 11 different roles (such as training, fund-raising, partnering); and filling most—if not all—of these roles appears to be significant to the implementation and growth of programs.

This report can be eye-opening for libraries, whether individual or in regions, embarking on their own ECRR initiatives or attempting to determine how to improve an existing program. In particular, two key findings are integral:

- **Prior Experiences of Interviewees (early literacy leaders at their libraries):** Many of the interviewees for this report identified themselves as having some sort of background in education, child development, or teaching. Whatever their prior experience, interviewees generally felt that the ECRR curriculum and related materials—coupled with their own commitment, and enthusiasm—provided the necessary tools for conducting early literacy workshops and incorporating key skill building concepts into storytimes.
- **Engagement by Public Policy Makers:** Interviewees said hands-on involvement in early literacy programs by elected government officials was minimal; occasionally, interviewees reported government officials read books aloud during special programs. Libraries, and, indeed, early childhood efforts in general, continue to face a challenge in bringing awareness to decision-makers.

The report also includes programmatic tips and best practices information as well as samples of handout materials.

By the third year of the initiative, we began to consider how to sustain the early literacy initiative long-term. The process of social change typically starts from one of two directions—from the top down and from the bottom up. Each method has its own strengths and challenges, but to expand into a major social force, both ends must meet in the middle and support one another. We felt Colorado had a running start from both the grass tops and the grass roots, but the time had come to explore formalizing a statewide network that would outlive its current practitioners.

In spring 2007, we received another small LSTA grant to start the process utilizing the existing early literacy providers. A report based on those findings, located at the end of this document, found:

1. Widespread support for establishing a statewide network,
2. A need for a system (preferably electronic) to share insights, materials, and questions,
3. A desire for more in-person staff training and support.

Over the fall, we continued with six, three-hour regional trainings, a six-hour intensive training in ECRR (nearly 200 library staff attended this collection of trainings), along with an analysis and updating of CSL's children's literacy resources pages, and handouts. (See [www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/Childrens\\_Literacy\\_Resources.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/Childrens_Literacy_Resources.htm)) We decided to use an existing e-list for children's services personnel, popularly known as CYS-LIB, as the communications method. (Colorado library personnel can register for the e-list via [www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/sllistserv.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/sllistserv.htm))

Winter 2007 found us recruiting people for a steering committee to establish the statewide network. In January 2008, the group met for the first time and in short order selected a name—Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy—as well as a mission statement.

*All children deserve the joy of reading and the skills in life that literacy brings. Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy is passionately committed to strengthening children's literacy through library services and community advocacy.*

Members formed two committees—advocacy and training--and selected priorities for activities. At the time of the preparation of this summary (June 2008), the future looks bright for Colorado libraries' early literacy initiative. Interest and support now have a central point around which to coalesce, the enthusiasm and skills of many people have been added to the effort, and as an advisory group to the Colorado State Library, the organization has some guarantees for continuity.

Colorado is just one of a number of states and regions whose libraries realize the many skills and dedicated personnel they bring to better the education of our nation's children. Efforts must continue to make educators and parents aware of the vast resources we stand ready to provide.

Report prepared by Bonnie McCune, Library Community Programs Consultant during the times covered by the document. Special thanks go to the members of the Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy steering committee, who are expanding the impact of the early literacy initiative exponentially; and to Robbie Bravman Marks, who conducted much of the research and writing, as well as functioned as the objective eye in all endeavors.)

## **Early Literacy Service Providers Offer Input Toward Creating a Statewide Network**

In 2007, the Colorado State Library (CSL) began laying the groundwork to build a statewide network of public library-based early literacy services providers. CSL believed such an effort would further the three overarching goals of its Early Literacy Initiative:

1. Helping young children acquire early literacy skills
2. Creating a strong foundation for later reading and school success
3. Positioning libraries as providers of educational and literacy services

In support of these efforts, CSL's Library Community Programs office received a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant in April 2007 that enabled CSL to undertake the research necessary to develop an action plan. This report focuses on the knowledge CSL gleaned through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funded research in the Spring and Summer of 2007.

Key research goals included:

- Obtaining a broad overview of public library-based enhanced early literacy services in Colorado
- Assessing the level of support for a statewide early literacy network
- Understanding issues faced by early literacy providers that could potentially be addressed in the context of a network
- Identifying key players whose background and interest in early literacy and might serve as the foundation for a statewide network

As detailed below, the study showed broad-based interest in the concept of a formalized network to support the work of Colorado's public library-based early literacy service providers. In response, CSL began facilitating activities to foster network formalization.

### **General Screening: Early Literacy Programming Models**

Between April and July 2007, CSL obtained information from 67 library service providers in 30 Colorado library districts (via email and/or telephone). Communication began with a screening questionnaire distributed via several Colorado library-employees' e-lists. CSL hoped to find as many respondents as possible who use specific early literacy program models (such as the PLA/ALSC's *Every Child Ready to Read @ your library [ECRR]*) in their work with young children and the people who care for them (i.e. adult relatives, child care providers). Additionally, CSL made direct contact with past participants of CSL-sponsored ECRR trainings (offered statewide since 2004), people known to have attended ECRR trainings other than CSL workshops, and people referred to CSL by those in all the above categories.

- Respondents from 19 of the 30 library districts said their district provides some form of model-based early literacy programming such as ECRR workshops for adult caregivers of young children or literacy-enhanced storytimes for children and their caregivers.
- Respondents from the other 11 districts identified as not using any particular early literacy model for their library programs targeted to young children and their caregivers.

### **Telephone Research: Interviews and Findings**

Based on the initial screening, CSL conducted telephone interviews with 35 people from the 19 library districts providing services based on the ECRR model. Interviewees identified as public library employees serving in a variety of different workplace roles (i.e. library directors; children's/youth services managers or staff; outreach coordinators; staff trainers; public relations/marketing specialists). Interviewees' relationships to early literacy work included

- Leaders of ECRR-based adult workshops
- Leaders of literacy-enhanced storytime programming for adults and children
- Organizers and administrators of such programming
- Those familiar with ECRR concepts (to some degree) but not personally involved with literacy-enhanced children's programming
- People interested in having access to ECRR training

Interview topics and statistics are as follows:

### **Interviewees' Early Literacy Backgrounds**

- At least one person from each of the 19 districts had taken an ECRR workshop either through CSL or some other agency.

### **Early Literacy Services Offered Through Interviewees' Public Libraries**

- Workshops about early literacy skills for adult caregivers of young children:
  - 11 districts had offered adult ECRR early literacy skills-training workshops in some or all branches (may also include outreach services)
- Literacy-enhanced storytimes:
  - 18 districts had offered literacy-enhanced storytime programming [based on the ECRR model] in some or all branches (may also include outreach services)
- Bilingual programs:
  - 2 districts had offered bilingual (Spanish/English) ECRR-based programs

### **Early Literacy Programming Successes and Challenges**

#### ***Literacy-enhanced storytimes (for children and their caregivers)***

- Since CSL undertook its Early Literacy Initiative in 2004, an ever-increasing number of Colorado public libraries are presenting their story time programs as "literacy enhanced."
- Two Denver Metro Area multi-branch library districts (Arapahoe and Douglas) have been training their staff toward the goal of literacy-enhanced storytimes as the norm district-wide.
- Numerous respondents discussed initial feelings of discomfort when speaking directly to adults about specific early literacy skills during multi-generational storytime programs.

#### ***Adult-only ECRR programs:***

- In 2006-2007, attendance at adult in-house ECRR workshops --those open to anyone wishing to attend such programs in library settings--was, in some cases, disappointing. Several respondents mentioned lack of childcare during the program times as a possible issue. Library districts reporting good or satisfactory attendance at adult in-house programs in 2006-2007 include: Arapahoe, Pikes Peak, and Ft. Collins.
- Libraries that provide adult-only OUTREACH programs (for specific groups or individuals outside [or inside] the library walls) generally feel they are successful. Numerous interviewees said that through their outreach workshops, they reach audiences who have not previously been regular library patrons.

### **Interviewees' Level of Interest in Forming a Statewide Network**

- Virtually all interviewees were in favor of establishing an early literacy network for public library personnel. Many respondents feel geographically and emotionally isolated in their early literacy work ("Am I doing this right? What could work better?")

### **Issues That Would be Helpful to Work Through as a Networked Group**

- Provide training and support for library staff
- Share successes and best practices
- Share lists of books that fit with early literacy skills development (and best ways to use those books)
- Build relationships and connections
- Act as a support group for one another
- Share handout materials
- Facilitate collaborative development of materials
- Order materials as a group to obtain bulk discounts

### **Interviewees' Availability to Serve as Early Literacy Staff Trainers**

- 19 individuals representing 14 library districts said they would be willing (time, staffing, and policy permitting) to help train library personnel within or outside of their own library district. NOTE: *The pool of trainers is potentially larger than 19: In several library districts, more people than CSL interviewed are capable of leading ECRR staff trainings.*
  - 7 interviewees said they could train others to lead literacy-enhanced storytimes

- 5 other respondents said they could train others to lead workshops for caregivers of young children
- 6 more of the respondents said they could lead both types of trainings mentioned above
- One additional respondent said she could lead trainings on administering early literacy programming

### **Conclusions and CSL Action**

The research showed there is considerable support for the concept of creating a children's literacy network to help facilitate early literacy work in Colorado's public libraries. Initial issues of interest to network proponents have been fleshed out.

As a response to this data, in August 2007, CSL began working with public library early literacy providers around the state toward creating a network structure, a network communication vehicle, and an initial action plan. Fall 2007 activities included:

- Presenting a series of six ECRR training workshops (based on stated needs and interests) for public library-based early literacy providers around the state (October 2007) as well as an intensive six-hour training at the Colorado Association of Libraries conference in November.
- Organizing a CSL-sponsored sharing-our-strengths early literacy panel session at the Colorado Association of Libraries conference (November 2007)
- Encouraging all interested parties to join the CYS-LIB listserv for early literacy idea sharing and support.

Robbie Bravman Marks, March 2008