Ready to Read at New York Libraries

Comprehensive Professional Development in Early Literacy Services and Outreach

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Photos courtesy of the Monroe County Library System and Rochester Public Library

In 2012, early literacy became a top priority for the New York State Library and the agency's work with the state's regional public library systems and libraries. While many public libraries had long provided storytimes for preschool-aged youth, the State Library determined there was a need and an opportunity for libraries to play a larger, more impactful role in building early learning skills by reaching parents and caregivers in addition to young children.

All families need information, guidance, and ongoing support to prepare their children for kindergarten success; the idea that libraries are uniquely positioned to assist this population in nearly every community strongly emerged.

The new focus on early literacy was at first driven by national research and further supported with data collected via surveys, focus groups, and discussion sessions with the state's public library community. Findings showed public library programming and services for families with young children were uneven across the state and varied in their approach and effectiveness in fostering early literacy and school preparedness. Many library staff members working with youth lacked expertise in early learning, as well as the skills needed to reach and serve all families, especially the parents and caregivers unaware of the programming and assistance libraries provide. In many areas, services for families beyond library walls were either sparse or nonexistent; staff needed a road map that was specific to early literacy for working in the greater community. They required instruction in how to develop effective, local partnerships and in how to reach disadvantaged families. The extensive training for staff that was clearly needed was not currently or freely available.

In 2014, the State Library launched Ready to Read at New York Libraries, a statewide initiative that included a comprehensive early literacy professional development program for public library staff in reaching and best serving and supporting all families with young children, but particularly those most in need. This same year, the agency was awarded a Laura Bush Twenty-First Century Librarian Program Planning Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to further research, plan, and begin phase 1 of the training program.

Now well underway, the Ready to Read at New York Libraries: Early Childhood Public Library Staff Development Program has grown into an ambitious five-year project, combining

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expert instruction in early literacy and outreach skills. Using an economical train-the-trainer approach, the program aims to reach the state's 23 regional public library systems and 1,067 public library outlets (main libraries, neighborhood branches, etc.) by June 2019. As of January 2017, ninety-eight workshops have been held, with a total attendance of 1,320. Staff from all 23 regional systems and 453 outlets took part (or 42 percent of the June 2019 target output). The participating libraries serve all types of communities—from small rural towns to large, diverse metropolitan areas.

During planning, the State Library developed an advisory group composed of library and early literacy leaders throughout the state. This early step proved essential, by providing an extensive foundation of support, channels for input from experts, and wider promotion within the field. The first year culminated with a summit bringing together those involved with the project, fostering next-step discussions and new collaborations.

The summit and the work of the advisory group helped build project partnerships with thirteen statewide organizations, including the Council on Children and Families and New York State Head Start. As a result, participating libraries have found it much easier to contact and work with the associated local outlets of these organizations.

Phase 1: Curriculum, Training Cohort, and Resources

The first phase of the program, completed in early 2017, focused primarily on developing the program curriculum and training the project's training cohort, a group of thirty to thirty-five youth services librarians associated with the regional public library systems. With deep knowledge of local community issues and needs, this group has been integral to the delivery of consistent, high-quality, cost-effective training and support in all regions of the state. From 2014 to 2016, the training cohort received train-the-trainer instruction from nationally recognized experts in the five foundation components that form the unique, research-based early childhood outreach curriculum of Ready to Read at New York Libraries. The curriculum and its components can be customized to meet state, regional, and/or local needs.

Each of the five components was covered in its own half- or full-day workshop:

1. **Everyone Serves Families with Young Children.** The first component empowers public library staff at all levels, including board members and volunteers, to realize and embrace their capacity to make the library welcoming to families with young children. The training focuses on identifying the challenges faced by modern families; understanding young children's brain, physical, and social development; and exploring opportunities for all library staff to promote early literacy and encourage family engagement. Participants leave with strategies for providing excellent customer service to young children and their parents and caregivers.

2. **Strengthening Young Families through Early Literacy Practices.** The second training component uses the successful Every Child Ready to Read Program Second Edition (ECRR2), developed by the Public Library Association (PLA) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), as its foundation. Through workshop activities and group work, participants learn to tailor storytimes and other programs to model and teach effective early literacy strategies to parents and caregivers. Participants learn how to engage families in the five key practices of ECRR2 (talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing). The training is designed to address the school preparedness expectations in New York; yet, it can be easily customized for other states to use as well.

3. **Early Literacy Community Asset Analysis.** In the third component, participants are provided with an essential foundation for planning early literacy services. The workshop covers collecting and interpreting community information and statistics, discovering both area needs and assets. Special emphasis is placed on identifying new or underserved populations, such as families with young children with disabilities, families with teenage parents, families with grandparents as caregivers, immigrant families, and low-income families.

A Look at It Locally

Ready to Read @ Monroe County Library System and Rochester Public Library

As an example of local customization and implementation, the Monroe County Library System and Rochester Public Library have used the Ready to Read at New York Libraries curriculum and resources to enhance early literacy services. Director Patricia Uttaro served on the program's advisory group, and library staff members joined the training cohort.

In 2015, Rochester was awarded a $500,000 AmeriCorps grant that provided the library with up to twenty workers assigned to early childhood and family initiatives. A training cohort member used the program's curriculum to train these workers, and as a result, hundreds of quality early learning programs were provided to families in the local community. For instance, a six-week "Strengthening Young Families through Early Literacy Practices" series for children and their parents and caregivers was offered and well attended.

Rochester also found the program's "Early Literacy Community Asset Analysis" to be particularly helpful. This process identified the need for greater outreach to families in nontraditional locations throughout the community, as well as the lack of books in homes. In response, the library hired a full-time children's outreach librarian and placed AmeriCorps workers in County Department for Social Services offices; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices; and family court waiting rooms. *Library to Go* kits were also developed and an existing book distribution program was increased. More than 1 million free books have been distributed in Rochester since 2014.

Ready to Read at New York Libraries also assisted Rochester in uncovering barriers that were keeping families from using the library. The library found the possibility of incurring debt from library fines was enough to keep some families away. In response, Rochester eliminated daily fines for all materials coded for children and teens in mid-2016; since this time, circulation has increased 10 percent.

Finally, building from the "Early Learning Spaces" component curriculum, Rochester updated spaces for children at the central library, many branch libraries, and the toy library. The toy library collection is now widely shared among Rochester's library outlets based on programming needs and community interest.

As seen with the Rochester example, Ready to Read at New York Libraries is making an impact. Though most of the regional training is being planned for 2018 and 2019, *Public Library Annual Report* data has already indicated significant progress at local levels. From 2013 to 2016, early literacy programs in public libraries across the state grew 32 percent to 134,734 sessions offered, with attendance up by 37 percent to more than 2.8 million people.*

* *2013 and 2016 Public and Association Libraries Annual Reports* (Albany: New York State Library, 2017).

4. **Strategies for Successful Partnerships and Outreach to Families with Young Children.** This component builds directly on the third by using identified needs and assets to develop a plan for building partnerships and conducting outreach. Focus is on the importance of moving beyond the physical library building to collaborate with others that share the common mission of fostering early learning and kindergarten readiness. Effective strategies for reaching all families with young children are presented, including special tips for reaching those previously unserved.

5. **Early Learning Spaces.** In the last workshop, participants learn how to create a physical environment in public libraries that encourages play and supports early learning for young children and their families. Ideas and solutions are presented for multiple scenarios, for libraries of all sizes with and without readily available space, staff, and/or resources. Planning, designing, and funding welcoming, flexible spaces; choosing the right materials; and addressing accessibility and ADA compliance are all discussed.

For each of the curriculum components, the State Library, working with experts, developed a training tool kit for use by the training cohort members for conducting workshops. The easy-to-tailor, online kits each contain a comprehensive handbook, slide presentation, handouts, and evaluation tools that employ outcome-based evaluation methods. The five kits are free to download at www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/earlylit/toolkits.htm.

Training cohort members began offering workshops in a particular component soon after they completed train-the-trainer instruction in that component. The training cohort initially used and tested draft training tool kits with workshop participants (a "living laboratory" approach), and revisions were subsequently made based on their feedback and ideas. The current kits reflect valuable input after use in the field.

To note, the workshops can be offered as stand-alone sessions or as a supplement to another program such as Family Place, Mother Goose on the Loose, and Supercharged Story Times.

Or they may be offered in a different order based on participants' expertise and needs (except for the fourth, "Strategies for Successful Partnerships and Outreach to Families with Young Children," as this workshop should follow the third).

In fact, the training sequence originally began with "Early Literacy Community Asset Analysis," with the idea that participants should start with assessment; however, training cohort members found that "Everyone Serves Families with Young Children" generates staff enthusiasm for early literacy across all library departments. It fosters a strong foundation of support, particularly from administrators and trustees, for continued staff training in Ready to Read at New York Libraries and the development of early learning programming and services. This component therefore became the recommended first training for most libraries and systems.

During phase 1, Ready to Read at New York Libraries also created resources for direct use by library staff, parents, and caregivers. As part of the greater initiative, the State Library offers DayByDayNY.org and a program Facebook page at www.facebook.com/Ready2ReadNY. DayByDayNY.org and its Spanish counterpart, DayByDayNYsp.org, are interactive online resources to be used directly with children; they foster early literacy through fun stories, songs, and activities that change each day. Included is the high-quality One More Story picture book collection. DayByDayNY.org was originally adapted from DayByDaySC.org, a service of the South Carolina State Library; and the Spanish version was developed from the website created by the Library of Virginia.

Phase 2: Regional Training

Now in the second phase (2017 to 2019), Ready to Read at New York Libraries is focused on conducting regional training workshops for public library staff and growing partnerships. Support for the training is provided by the State Library's Family Literacy Library Services Program. The state funds are provided to the twenty-three regional public library systems, and they in turn deliver expert training and support to their member libraries.

The project also includes a two-step certification process for trainers to support the goal of developing librarians into recognized and knowledgeable advocates of early literacy in communities. Training cohort members receive level 1 certification in a component once they complete the associated train-the-trainer workshop. Level 1 denotes preparation to train library staff. An alternate route to certification is in place as well; this route uses a combination of training and mentorship to bring in new trainers as needed, thus perpetuating the training cohort and sustaining the overall program.

To obtain level 2 certification to train library staff *and* the early childhood workforce, training cohort members must complete two satisfactory trainings for library staff. The certification training program of Ready to Read at New York Libraries has been added to New York Works for Children, an integrated professional development system for the state's early childhood and school-aged workforces.

Program replication beyond New York State is also part of phase 2. The State Library recently shared program materials with the Stanislaus County Library System in Modesto, California, as they plan to offer all five training components for staff in the system's thirteen branch libraries. The community is concerned about the severe lack of kindergarten readiness in some areas and wants to use the program to reach those families most in need.

For more information, and to access the free, customizable Training Tool Kits, visit the Ready to Read at New York Libraries website at: http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/earlylit/index.html.