

Early Literacy in Wisconsin

Sharing a Statewide Harvest

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When the Growing Wisconsin Readers early literacy initiative (growingwisconsinreaders.org) began in 2013, the focus was straightforward: help parents and caregivers read effectively with babies, toddlers, and young children. As this multiyear initiative passes the halfway mark, it is clear that this simple idea has sprouted, branched, and bloomed in bountiful ways. Not only has the early literacy message reached the original audience, but the project has established and enriched state, regional, and local partnerships.

Growing Wisconsin Readers is coordinated by the Public Library Development Team at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the state library agency. The initiative builds upon ongoing statewide early learning efforts championed by Wisconsin's more than 380 public libraries. Using Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Grants to States Program, the three-year initiative involves competitive and noncompetitive components.

Noncompetitive components include distribution of print promotional materials, development of a mobile-friendly trilingual website, and planning of workshops and a statewide early literacy symposium.

In the competitive realm, public libraries and regional public library systems have the opportunity to apply for early literacy project grants ranging from \$2,000 to \$25,000 as part of the initiative. Grant projects focus on local and regional early literacy needs and include collaboration with agencies and networks. Sample projects include development of early literacy kits to circulate among patrons and child care providers, early literacy

programming and services to Spanish speakers, outreach to low-income families and agencies that serve them, and youth services staff early literacy training.

Competitive mini-grants in the amount of \$250 were awarded to forty small libraries to initiate one of two shelf-ready projects—a 1000 Books Before Kindergarten reading program or an early literacy activity area. Funding for these projects allowed libraries to either jump-start or further develop existing efforts.

1,000 Books

The 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten programs, popular in Wisconsin, encourage families with young children to make reading and library visits a regular habit. These programs are typically organized in a way that allows families to track the number of books read anywhere (home, day care, or preschool, and during library storytime) and any number of times (from once to multiple times per night) toward the 1,000-title mark.

The origins of the 1000 Books idea stem from Bremen (IN) Public Library where librarian Sandy Krost was inspired by



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author Mem Fox's *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*.

In Wisconsin, passive programs like 1,000 Books count as “drop-in activities” on the state public library annual report. Increasingly, Wisconsin's public libraries are finding value in offering independent activities that promote reading and library usage in a flexible way for families. 1,000 Books programs are adaptable for libraries too—there is no “right” way to run the program. Libraries can customize the theme, structure, and goals.

However it is organized, 1,000 Books programs empower and celebrate families with young children reading together. The recognition of young readers at the one hundred, five hundred, or thousand mark of titles read is an accomplishment that kids, families, libraries, and communities can stand behind.

Early Literacy Activity Areas

The second shelf-ready project supported by the Growing Wisconsin Readers mini-grants was early literacy activity areas. Early literacy activity areas are spaces in public libraries designed to encourage early literacy skill-building through reading, writing, singing, talking, signing, and playing. These areas usually incorporate books, constructive and imaginative play materials, and informational and instructional signage.

Communication strategies are critical to the success of the activity areas. Without messaging tactics, a box of puppets and a play theater might appear to be the library version of a fast food restaurant ball pit—simply a fun diversion for kids to experience independently. Rather, early literacy activity areas encourage play and learning for children *with* their parents or caregivers.

For example, magnets and alphabet spinners inspire young children to play letter pattern and sound games with their adult guardians. Similarly, a bin of dress-up clothes and props encourage imaginative play and inventive dialogue between children and adults. Helpful signage, visual posters, take-home tips, thoughtful book displays, and positive interactions with library staff solidify the why and how of these early literacy experiences to parents and caregivers.

Competitive grant projects, whether on a large or small scale, have helped achieve the goal of the Growing Wisconsin Readers

initiative by empowering adults with important information and skills regarding the reading development of babies, toddlers, and young children. These projects, while noble, effective, and sustainable, are not necessarily innovative.

The initial success of the Growing Wisconsin Readers initiative has not been the growth in the number of library early literacy endeavors. Rather, the greatest yield of this initiative has come from relationships cultivated on local, regional, and state levels. Like plants that benefit from growing near certain species, mutual symbiotic relationships have developed in the field of early childhood in Wisconsin.

On the local level, Growing Wisconsin Readers materials (brochures and posters printed in English, Spanish, and Hmong and customized with local library information) have been distributed by libraries to a variety of community locations such as child care locations, Head Start facilities, schools, places of wor-

ship or congregation, community centers, medical clinics, and other locales frequented by families with young children.

In one community, the brochures were distributed by the chamber of commerce in a new resident welcome kit. While the message (early literacy is important) and the messenger (public library) are not new, the Growing Wisconsin Readers materials have increased the visibility and value of what public libraries offer to young children and their families. In some communities, distributing the materials reinforced existing connections with local partners. In others, this act led to both new and re-established partnerships with child care providers, family resource coordinators, school districts, and more.

On a regional level, the seed has spread even further. A large, geographically and economically

diverse state, Wisconsin is divided into seventeen regional public library systems. These systems, working independently and collaboratively, have connected with a range of early childhood partners, associations, and organizations in various parts of the state. In some regions, the public library was a new and welcome member to the table.

In other areas, early childhood educators were invited to participate in early literacy professional development alongside librarians. “I’m working with agencies and groups that never thought to connect to libraries before or didn’t know how,” said Leah Langby, youth services consultant at the Indianhead Federated Library System in Northwestern Wisconsin. Regional

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Learning to read begins with A, B, C at the Allen-Dietzman Public Library in Livingston, Wisconsin.

collaborations reinforce the shared commitment of various organizations to improving the reading lives of young children. In addition, regional connections have improved communications between library systems and area groups as well as increased knowledge of each other's organizational structure and constituents.

Likewise, on a state level, relationships have both blossomed and deepened as a result of Growing Wisconsin Readers' efforts. At the Department of Public Instruction, headquarters of the initiative, awareness of the role of the Public Library Development Team in the agency itself has increased. In addition, monthly networking and resource sharing among consultants with a vested interest in literacy continues to yield positive and systemic results.

For example, the public library youth services consultant, early childhood consultant, and literacy consultant, each from separate teams within the agency, serve as liaisons to a network of regional early learning specialists. Together, this group is currently developing a series of presentations and tools to be used for statewide early literacy professional development.

Reach Out and Read

The Growing Wisconsin Readers initiative has formed strong statewide connections with the children's health-care profession through Reach Out and Read, a national evidence-based clinical program in which physicians prescribe books and encourage families to read together. Dr. Dipesh Navsaria is the medical director of the Wisconsin chapter of Reach Out and



A Growing Wisconsin Readers poster displayed at a local laundromat creates visibility for early literacy and the Altoona Public Library.

Read. A well-respected advocate for early literacy in both medical and library communities, Dr. Navsaria supported Growing Wisconsin Readers from the onset by reviewing content and presenting research on how "books build better brains."

As a result, many Wisconsin public libraries forged stronger connections with local pediatric and family practice clinics by creating literacy-rich waiting rooms, sharing information with families about early literacy programs and services, and providing book purchasing support to clinics participating in Reach Out and Read. More broadly, Wisconsin youth services librarians are more aware of the benefits of partnering with health-care professionals, and subsequently this relationship extends further, from librarians to their directors and from physicians to their young patients. Early literacy is understood and valued in every role.

Growing Wisconsin Readers reflects a growing understanding of the role and benefit of early literacy. Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued an early literacy policy statement formally recommending that its membership make literacy promotion a regular part of pediatric care. An early literacy partnership was announced between the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Clinton Global Initiative, Too Small To Fail, Scholastic, and Reach Out and Read nationally to promote early literacy from birth. Because of the local, regional, and state relationships cultivated through the Growing Wisconsin Readers initiative, this announcement had collective resonance across the state. Growing Wisconsin Readers will continue to develop through the final year but thus far, an abundant community harvest is coming in. ↻