

Play & Read

Lessons Learned from Early Literacy Outreach

CLAIRE PARRISH AND TESSA MICHAELSON SCHMIDT



Library storytimes and services become more accessible to non-users and irregular users when offered at the local farmers' market.

This past election season, the Early Ed for President campaign, championed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), brought civic attention to a topic that has steadfast traction in the library world—early literacy. Unlike other educational initiatives that come and go, early literacy is a winning investment.

The Spring 2015 issue of *Children and Families* featured the piece *Early Literacy in Wisconsin: Sharing a Statewide Harvest*. Early literacy efforts have continued to grow in our state and have yielded a new program: Play & Read. Our state library and education agency was approached by the state agency in charge of AmeriCorps about a grant to support early literacy in select counties (see sidebar).

With a ticking deadline for funds with an expiration date, a team of literacy, library, early childhood, and service learning experts was assembled. Together, Play & Read was designed as a family-focused early literacy empowerment program led by AmeriCorps volunteers, based in public libraries in counties with high poverty rates. With \$415,000 grant funds secured for a pilot year, Play & Read was launched in the summer of 2015.

Managed by two consultants at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and coordinated by a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Studies, Play & Read required careful consideration of both the overall project goals and the needs of local library host sites. As a pilot project, AmeriCorps members and library host site staff had to be flexible regarding structure and outcomes. The format and frequency of play groups was anticipated to look different in the seven host site communities because of library hours and locations, lifestyles of participating families, and availability of transportation. For example, some sites offered evening and weekend playgroups while other sites opted for weekday sessions.

As the pilot year unfolded, there were surprises, challenges, and expectations fulfilled. Play & Read was new for everyone involved—project staff, library staff, AmeriCorps volunteers, and families—so there were many conversations about how things could/should work. In some ways, the project was not groundbreaking; after all, playgroups were essentially small, intimate storytime sessions for registered participants. In other ways, it offered new ways of doing things, such as the role of



Claire Parrish is Play & Read Coordinator and Public Services Director at Rice Lake (WI) Public Library. **Tessa Michaelson Schmidt** is Play & Read Project Manager and Public Library Youth and Inclusive Services Consultant at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

trained, committed volunteers who embedded themselves in the community as early literacy and library ambassadors.

What follows are lessons learned from three of the Play & Read sites in regard to outreach initiatives; specifically what developed when libraries leveraged the AmeriCorps members to establish or enhance efforts to connect with young families who were not library regulars.

Lessons Learned

Brewer Public Library (Municipal Population: 5,186)

The Brewer Public Library in Richland Center, the smallest of the library host sites, saw a significant difference in how people perceived the library, specifically the children's department, because of the outreach conducted by the Play & Read AmeriCorps members. AmeriCorps members were required to go out into the community to encourage parents and caregivers to sign up for the play groups. Registration efforts included visiting day care providers and school programs, posting fliers at businesses around town, and other marketing techniques.

In Richland Center, AmeriCorps members went on a local radio show to promote the play groups, which resulted in a parent and child, who were not regular library visitors, to come to the library to sign up. This outreach was beneficial for the library as a whole, because Play & Read in turn encouraged library card sign up and use of other services.

The AmeriCorps members also began utilizing the library's Facebook page more effectively and frequently, which demonstrated that the library was regularly holding programming, doing new things, and wasn't stuck in the past. They also spent a lot of time sprucing up the children's section and storytime rooms, adding signage, rethinking book placement, and creating displays that appealed to families as soon as they entered. Both rooms are in the basement, and lacked the inviting appeal that they now have. The children's librarian and two AmeriCorps members worked diligently to put together fun events for families, like Super Saturday Craft Days, and to build connections with other organizations in the community, which included a partnership with the Farm to School program.

Beloit Public Library (Municipal Population: 36,792)

AmeriCorps members at the Beloit Public Library realized that if they wanted to make a lasting impact, they needed to think broadly to engage the entire community. In addition, they chose to think beyond the grant pilot year in terms of sustainable programming.

Casting a wide net proved to be an effective technique for the Beloit Play & Read team. Outreach efforts to bring community organizations to the early literacy table started slowly, but the



Small intimate playgroups allow for close connections with kids, families, and books.

AmeriCorps members pushed forward. The first meeting had only one representative from the Stateline Literacy Council and the AmeriCorps members, but they were able to come up with a name for their initiative (All Beloit Children) and brainstorm ideas about how to impact Beloit families through early literacy play groups.

The next meeting was more successful, with AmeriCorps members, Women, Infants and Children (WIC) staff, and Stateline Literacy. Then the YMCA joined. By the time the group met in April, they had added another five representatives from the school district. Currently, the All Beloit Children (ABC) task force has representatives from Stateline Literacy, YMCA, Community Action (housing), the City Manager's Office, School District of Beloit, Beloit College, and the Optimist Club, in addition to the library director and youth services manager.

In fall 2016, Beloit Public Library began offering ABC Playgroups in three elementary schools, two local daycares, and in the library. They will also have family literacy engagement sessions on Saturdays held at participating elementary schools. The group is working with the city manager's office and their neighborhood revitalization grant to identify local community centers in each neighborhood as potential sites for playgroups. The Optimist Club and School District are willing to sponsor family projects, such as building bookshelves and making youth literacy activity kits for families to use at home.

Play & Read Project



Play & Read was an AmeriCorps and Serve Wisconsin service project facilitated by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction in 2015–16.

The focus of this service project was improving rural communities by building on children's early literacy skills to position them for academic and social success. Specifically, the project emphasized the following:

- increasing literacy among three and four year olds, as measured by pre- and post-assessments
- growing capacity and comfort of families to engage in literacy activities with their children
- helping libraries better connect with families of young children through outreach efforts, especially to non-library users

Play & Read placed nineteen AmeriCorps members in seven public libraries throughout southern Wisconsin. Teams and single members built on children's preexisting literacies by facilitating play groups for three and four year olds. Play groups included shared reading, writing, and intentional vocabulary development. Children participated in the program weekly, and families also took part in at least two one-on-one literacy check-ins with the AmeriCorps members. As a grant requirement, members also administered early literacy assessments with the participating children to gather data highlighting gains in literacy. In addition to the play groups, members collaborated with library staff to offer support for additional early literacy efforts.

None of this work would be possible without the commitment of volunteers to help run the programming. AmeriCorps members have already trained over twenty volunteers to continue outreach programming on behalf of the library and continue to attract more volunteers.

A local technical college has also approved the program as a work study opportunity for early childhood education students seeking volunteer and internship opportunities. Also, a volunteer organization from the University of Wisconsin–Rock County has committed to supporting the project. Play & Read AmeriCorps members were able to leverage multiple community assets to build a self-sustaining program.

La Crosse Public Library (Municipal Population: 51,992)

An outreach success in La Crosse was reestablishing the library's relationships with local daycare, preschool, and Head Start

providers. Through Play & Read, AmeriCorps members and library staff were able to schedule and provide regular storytimes at fifteen childcare settings.

Library staff and members saw a change in the daycare providers' behavior; they began coming into the library more often to utilize their resources which became an opportunity to "teach the teacher." Members also hosted a family night at a local daycare center to demonstrate practical applications of early literacy skills and discuss ideas for promoting and implementing early literacy skills in the classroom and at home.

The AmeriCorps members also saw success in providing storytimes at the local Farmers' Market. On days when the weather would cooperate, around thirty children and family members would participate in the Farmers' Market storytime. The AmeriCorps member who ran this event successfully engaged families who may not otherwise have utilized the library.

These storytimes offered fun, interactive activities that promoted early literacy skills, including take-home information for families. This was the first summer for the Farmers' Market storytimes, but both the library and market organizers look forward to continuing the partnership. Through these initiatives, La Crosse Public Library is seeing more families coming into the library and taking part in library events.

What we Learned

Play & Read came to fruition under the alignment of several stars. Like many pilot projects, there are plenty of items on the "do differently next time" list.

For example, the timeline of the project was fast and furious. The start date was rigid, along with hiring dates, which made getting everyone on board with a brand new project, a bit challenging. Specifically, we found, in hindsight, that the AmeriCorps members needed additional training in regard to child development and early literacy basics. In addition, the required early literacy assessments proved to be vexing on philosophical and managerial levels—the tests were awkward to administer and were received with mixed feelings by library staff and some families of three- and four-year-olds.

However, one of the greatest hopes for the project was to develop a structure that could be supported with or without grant funds as well as be replicable in other parts of the state. The lessons learned from the host site libraries indicate that committing staff time to training volunteers, identifying library non-user populations, and allocating time and resources to community outreach yields rich results.

The process might be messy and vary from one locale to the next, but it is worth the effort. Ultimately, the relationships we want young children and their families to develop with reading and the library requires intentional cultivation by the library and all members of the community. ☺

The Astronomical Event of the Decade

Library Opportunities with the Coming Total Eclipse of the Sun

ANDREW FRAKNOI AND DENNIS SCHATZ

On August 21, 2017, we will be treated to the first total eclipse of the sun visible in the continental United States in almost forty years. Because the total eclipse can only be seen in the United States, it is being called the “All American Total Solar Eclipse.” In this kind of eclipse, the Moon gets in front of the sun in the sky and blocks its light.

The spectacular *total* eclipse, with the sun fully covered, will only be visible in a narrow band about sixty to seventy miles across, stretching diagonally across the country from a beach in Oregon to a beach in South Carolina. The last time an eclipse path crossed the continental United States was in 1918, truly remote for the children who come to the library these days.

Observers must be in that narrow path of dark shadow to see the glory of a total eclipse—the sky going dark in the middle of the day, stars coming out, and the faint atmosphere of the sun revealed as a flickering glow.

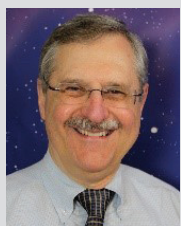
However, everyone in North America will see a *partial* solar eclipse, where a big “bite” will be taken out of the sun. Because part of the sun continues to shine brightly into our eyes during a partial eclipse, observers must protect their eyes with the



Poster design by Tyler Nordgren (University of the Redlands).

right kind of filters or look at a projected image that is too dim to hurt. Inexpensive, but certified, paper-framed eclipse glasses are available.

This will be the first US eclipse of the Internet age, and information is likely to be dispersed in a much wider range of ways. However they learn about the eclipse, most people will need clear reliable guidance for when and how to safely observe it. Libraries can play a key role in getting this information



Andrew Fraknoi is the Chair of the Astronomy Department at Foothill College in the San Francisco Bay Area and a former Executive Director of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. Poster design by Tyler Nordgren (University of the Redlands). **Dennis Schatz** was formerly the Senior Vice President of the Pacific Science Center, the science museum in Seattle, and is the author of twenty-three science books for children. He was program director for science education at the National Science Foundation from 2011 to 2015.

out to families and their communities. To get up to speed on the full eclipse story, download the free eight-page, nontechnical eclipse guide published by National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) at www.nsta.org/solarscience.

This will give you all the basic information—what causes eclipses, where and when you can see the 2017 eclipse, what time it will happen in each part of the country, and how to help your patrons observe it safely. And this booklet can be distributed or printed without any restrictions.

For explaining eclipses to children, you may want to consider ordering a copy of *When the Sun Goes Dark*, a children's book we wrote for the National Science Teachers Association Press.

A number of other books and websites are also available. For adults, you can find a guide to published and web-based eclipse resources at www.astrosociety.org/eclipse.

If you have not already done so, you and others in your library will want to determine how to incorporate the sun, moon, and eclipses into your 2017 program planning. Here are some suggestions for preparing for understanding and observing this remarkable celestial event:

1. Connect with your local college or university astronomy department, high school physics (or astronomy) teacher, or science museum to see what they are planning for the eclipse and whether someone might give a public talk or do a training session for the staff at your library. Training via video will also be available from several organizations as the eclipse grows closer.

2. Connect with your local amateur astronomy group to see if they will be doing outreach connected with the eclipse.

Eclipse Education Resources

Networks

STARNet (<http://www.starnetlibraries.org/>), a national network sponsored by NASA and the National Science Foundation, provides science-technology activities and resources for public libraries. They will be a central eclipse-information clearing-house for libraries in 2017; it is free to join the network.

Written Material

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Espenak, Patricia. 2015. *Total Eclipse or Bust: A Family Road Trip*. Astropixels. A family goes on a trip for the 2017 eclipse. <http://astropixels.com/pubs>.

Branley, Franklin. 1988. *Eclipse*. HarperCollins. An illustrated book for younger children.

Mass, Wendy. 2008. *Every Soul a Star*. Little, Brown. A young adult novel (middle school level) about three kids who meet at an eclipse gathering; has a lot of good astronomy.

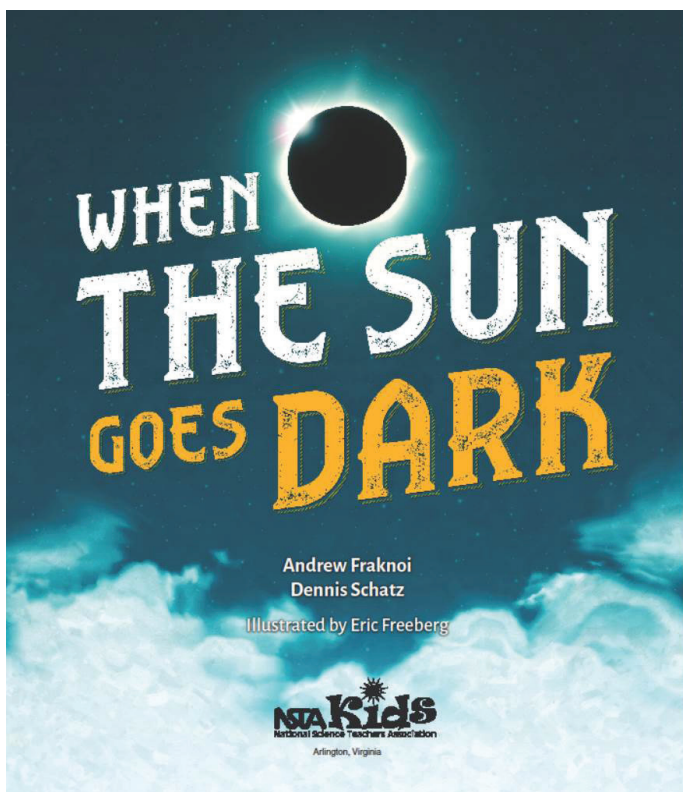
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Online

"What is an Eclipse?" NASA. <http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/nasa-knows/what-is-an-eclipse-58>. For students in grades 5–8.

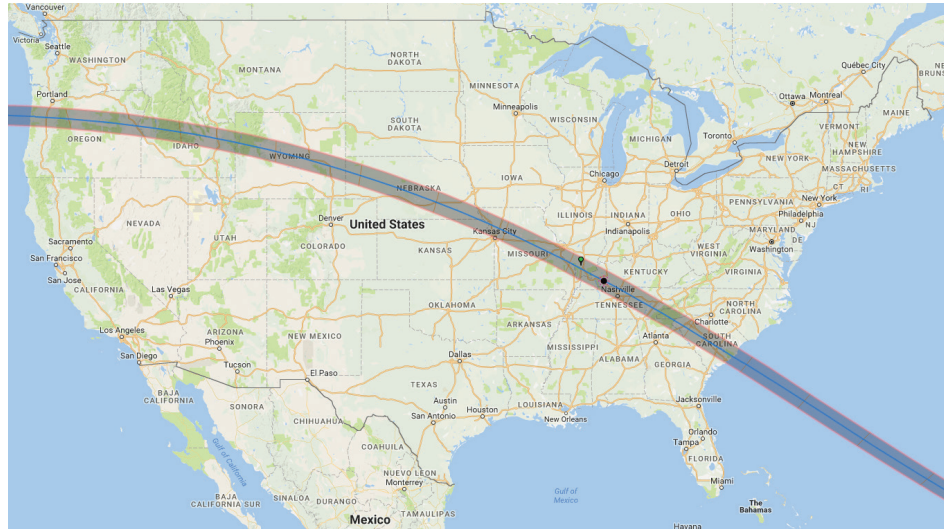
"Solar Eclipses for Beginners." Mr. Eclipse. <http://www.mreclipse.com/Special/SEprimer.html>. By NASA's Dr. Fred Espenak.

"NASA EDGE: Solar Eclipse 2017 Preview Show." YouTube video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DDICymjhg0>.



Check out the Night Sky Network (<http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/clubs-and-events.cfm>) to locate any amateur astronomy groups near you that like to connect with the public. Their members are likely to have eclipse observing experience they can share.

3. Put together a collection of eclipse materials for display and make information available on how to find copies.
4. During the months and weeks leading up to the eclipse, host public programs where you share ways to safely observe the eclipse or have patrons build pinhole sun projectors. Follow the instructions in the NSTA Observing Guide to have binocular stations to project images of the sun and/or to sell eclipse viewing glasses.
5. A grant from the Moore Foundation will help libraries obtain a package of free eclipse glasses and information. Register for the program through the STARNet website; see the sidebar, "Eclipse Education Resources."



The best viewing arc for the eclipse. Source: http://xjubier.free.fr/en/site_pages/solar_eclipses/TSE_2017_.GoogleMapFull.html.

6. On the day of the event, host an eclipse observing party at your library that includes information, demonstrations, and safe observing strategies.

No matter what you decide to do, we wish you a cloudless, safe eclipse in August 2017, and much success helping your community enjoy it safely. ☺

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