

Dream It, Write It, Share It

How One Library Engages Students' Summer Learning Program Interest

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"This has a big impact on our second graders, as it engages their creativity and attention to the writing process in a way that no other assignment does—seeing their work interpreted as a play performed by adults and presented to the entire second grade is a big deal to them!"

—Maranda Freer, second grade teacher

The Mint Hill Branch Library is one of twenty locations in the Charlotte (NC) Mecklenburg Library (CML) system. While Charlotte is home to over eight hundred thousand people, Mint Hill is a quieter suburb southeast of the Queen City with a population just over twenty-four thousand. There are three elementary schools, one middle school, and two high schools in the library's assigned region.

Each year, the children's team of one librarian and three youth specialists at the Mint Hill Library make efforts to visit each school and promote CML's summer learning program. We share the logistics of the program, advertise events, and connect with our community in a professional yet fun manner. Despite all of our efforts, participation waned from one particular school, and we had to act.

I believe in the public library's summer learning program. We are free and accessible and our purpose is transparent and pure. We offer literacy and educational programs to get kids excited about reading and interested in new topics. I took it upon myself to focus our team's strengths on visualizing an approach that would increase the summer learning program's visibility and increase participation from one local elementary school in particular.



Donna Reynolds and Kaitlyn Mullis help perform a winning writing entry at Clear Creek Elementary School, May 2016.

Our Strength

What the Youth Services department of the library does best is bring stories to life. If we could bring the children's stories to life, we thought, they might feel more engaged with our public library and compelled to participate in our programs. Thus originated "Dream It, Write It, Share It," a writing contest for second-grade students.

The objective was simple: to foster a partnership with an elementary school that would encourage students to write and participate in the library's summer learning program, and provide a multi-media experience for elementary-aged children in our community. The Dream It, Write It, Share It contest would aim to influence students to write and give them the chance to see their works produced and performed by library staff at their school location.

How It Works

In 2015, I outlined the program in a formal proposal to our local elementary school. The proposal also included statistics



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of summer learning program participation from previous years, the benefits of summer learning programs, and the library's willingness to partner in an innovative venture.

Production would occur sometime in late May or early June (whenever was convenient for the school). The library expected the performance to last approximately thirty to sixty minutes. Five winners would be selected. Winners' families would be contacted to attend the presentation, but students would learn of their selection on that day.

The guidelines included:

- Instructions for students
 - Write an original story, no more than three pages long. It may be typed or handwritten. There may be multiple authors, but no more than three.
 - Include illustrations if appropriate.
 - Use descriptive language and explain characters completely.
 - Submit the manuscript in final draft form (clean copies with no scratch-outs, misspellings, or other grammatical corrections). Manuscripts submitted after the teacher's deadline can be submitted at the Mint Hill Library.
- Writing will be judged on creativity and ease of translation to a theatrical production.
- The library may use live actors, puppets, traditional storytelling, or any other medium to portray your writing piece.

Growing a Partnership

I scheduled a meeting with the grade school principal, who quickly got on board. The principal relayed the prospective partnership to grade-level teachers, and they, too, were quick to agree. We scheduled dates and times to present the program to the students. Over two days, we visited each classroom to explain and promote participation in the contest.

From there, the classroom teachers engaged students and encouraged them to submit their work. We received more than sixty entries, and five winners and three honorable mentions were selected.

Prior to the performance, the Youth Services team met twice to prepare props and rehearse. We mostly used items from our existing programming resources (puppets and props), and we prepared other simple effects from art supplies (a jail cell from a cardboard box). There were a few items that needed to be purchased, with a total cost of five dollars.

Showtime and Beyond

On June 2, 2015, the children's staff at the Mint Hill Library performed the winning pieces to the entire second grade and their family members. Titles from *The Bad Sleepover* and *The Lonely Brunitus* brought literary magic to approximately two hundred students, staff, and parents. The audience laughed and interacted with certain stories, like in *The Evil Dr. Pickle*, where the audience was sprayed with water as actors portrayed "the mermaid and the dolphin wash[ing the pickle] off with a hose."

During the summer, several students and staff visited the Mint Hill Library and complimented the performance and the library's efforts to partner. One winner came to the library with her family. The mother thanked me for an entertaining performance and asked me to check her library card. She had some fines recorded on her account, which dated back nine years.

She looked up for a moment then said, "Yep, that's about right. The last time I was in the library was nine years ago." I jokingly asked if the reason she returned was the library's recent performance at her child's school and she said, "Actually, it is!"

Ultimately, the elementary school showed significant improvement in its students' participation in our summer learning program. We saw a 46 percent increase in registrations and a 93 percent increase in completions in our summer learning program over the previous year.

Accomplishment and Progress

This success did not go unnoticed. I have presented *Dream It, Write It, Share It* at a CML Youth Services quarterly meeting as well as at a North Carolina State Library Summer Reading Conference. The Mint Hill Library has enlisted an additional local school to partner with and use this program to promote the summer learning program in 2016.

Also in 2016, a modified version was brought to a high-need school that historically had zero participation in our summer learning programs. The teachers from the original school appreciated the unique opportunity to partner and requested that we continue the following year. In 2016, we received more than seventy entries in the story contest. Statistics from the summer learning program show that participation and completion rates have held fast.

The enthusiasm of the school staff, the structure of the contest, and the magic of live performance combined to make this a successful partnership. Library visits and summer reading program participation increased and we built a strong foundation for future collaborations with our local schools. The CML Youth Services staff is glad that we dreamed up this contest, wrote a proposal, and shared it with our community. 🔄