

Blowing Up Summer Reading

One Library's Approach

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Summer reading can be a beloved and anticipated, but sometimes loathed, tradition among librarians...and, let's face it, some kids as well. Once we had reached the people who liked our traditional approach to our summer reading program (SRP), we sought to increase participation. Surveys helped us identify barriers to participation. We found that families struggle with time to visit the library or they may be frustrated with restrictive SRP rules (they lose their tracking sheets, go on vacation, etc.). The families are, however, looking for programs that target their children's specific interests, especially ones to help the children build skills, as opposed to regular programming designed to appeal to a wider audience.

In the summer of 2017, we decided to mix it up. We changed the format of our SRP, adding a remote option that included mailed postcards; we changed the programs by eliminating large events and focusing on camps with experts; and we changed our prize structure to reward reading all summer long, with no limits on how many prizes a single patron could receive for reading.

Summer Reading in a Postcard

While many parents found coming to the library to be a hassle, they still wanted their kids to be engaged and learning over the summer. To reach them, we mailed postcards with information and tickets to educational activities, free of charge. We got the tickets in the same way we have always gotten tickets for our SRP—by soliciting donations. The difference this year was that rather than asking our donors to print them, we obtained permission to print them ourselves on our

postcard. We sent the families everything that they would need to participate in the SRP and let them choose how to engage. The postcard included the ticket, information about upcoming programs, book recommendations, and links to fun online databases and activities. To make the postcards affordable, we printed them in house, and our library foundation registered with the United States Postal Service (USPS) as a non-profit, resulting in a 50 percent decrease in the price of postage. The participation in our SRP increased from 464 participants in 2016 to approximately 750 participants in 2017, measured in both years by the number of patrons who participated in our incentive programs and camps.

High-Interest, High-Engagement Camps

Attendance at targeted programs like our robotics camp was much better than at free weekly programming, so we added two-hour camps throughout the summer. The camps ran for two days and focused on high-interest topics such as robotics and tattoo art. We brought in experts and marketed the camps to kids interested in the subjects.



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We took one controversial step by charging small supply fees for expensive programs. We addressed access issues by offering scholarships for anyone who asked for one and made up the funds from a combination of library and donated funds. We found very little resistance to the small charges, and in fact we found a positive change in the number of participants who signed up actually attending the event, reflecting what we believe is an increased perception of value in library programs in our community. Additionally, to ensure the quality of programs, we enforced age requirements. We continued regular free programming for babies and preschoolers, as they have always been popular.

Less Rules, More Reading

We eliminated the weekly structure that required kids to do the reading in specific weeks and get specific prizes allotted to that week. Our goal was to free up our participants to read more and also to reduce the amount of time library staff spent tracking participation.

Basically, we took away limits. Kids could keep reading and receiving prizes as they achieved goals. This meant that some kids could get prizes several times a week, as there was no limit to how many prizes they could get.

There was a big prize bucket, and they could choose from it every time they came in with a completed card. We learned, however, that the bucket wasn't an awesome idea—we filled it with prizes of varying value, so some participants would get better prizes than others if they were lucky enough to come in right after it was filled.

However, the no limits approach was successful. We were a little concerned that it would go crazy, and we wouldn't be able to supply all of the prizes, so we budgeted a cushion, just in case. Our prizes included tickets to local events and attractions, restaurant meals, and a whole bunch of little prizes that we purchased.

Avid readers didn't turn out to be a serious problem. Some kids went crazy, but not so many that it sunk our budget. Parents loved the freedom, and the unofficial survey results were that kids were reading more. &

Early Literacy Hard at Work!



Left: Debbie Denissen of Green Bay reads to her newborn granddaughter, Trinity. Right: Melissa Morwood, senior youth services librarian for the Palo Alto City (CA) Library, presents storytime with her nephew, Wyatt.