

Outreach, Summer Programming, and the Advocacy Feedback Loop

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Outreach is Advocacy

The ALSC Advocacy & Legislation Committee is tasked with finding advocacy resources and sharing them with the rest of the ALSC community. The committee also educates library professionals about what advocacy actually is—ALSC's Everyday Advocacy initiative defines it as “at its most basic . . . about relationships . . . that have the power to advance or retreat our cause.”¹

Much of the work is already done for us. Many library professionals already engage in positive library advocacy every day, both in positive day-to-day interactions with customers, and through community outreach, especially during the summer months. Outreach, after all, is no longer a feature of exemplary library service; it is increasingly becoming a standard service offered by public libraries across the United States.

The Advocacy Feedback Loop

The advocacy feedback loop allows for continued community investment in both the causes libraries champion, like early literacy, and in libraries themselves. First, children's librarians offer a program, and children and families participate. Second, participants learn about things like essential early literacy practices for emergent readers or reading to prevent summer slide, and they recognize the library's role in offering programs that meet these goals. Third, participants return for more library programs where they have the opportunity to learn more about early literacy practices or to become more accomplished as readers.

This feedback loop happens with families who already use the library regularly. However, through outreach programming, librarians cast a much wider net. By reaching children and families who don't normally visit the library, children's librarians provide needed programming to underserved communities while increasing the strength and size of their advocacy feedback loops.

Summer Program Ideas

The Advocacy & Legislation Committee looked at various ways librarians have used outreach as advocacy during the summer. This is not an exhaustive list, but we hope it will spark some ideas for where you and your library can (or already are!) poised to expand your own advocacy feedback loop.

Early Literacy Programming

- **Playing.** Many parents don't fully appreciate the role of free play in healthy childhood development. Last summer, I helped facilitate a Madison (WI) Public Library program that brought Anji Play²—a specific method of

child-directed play—to three different city parks every week. Many of the attendees discovered the program by accident, and parents began to appreciate both the power of true play and recognize the public library as a community leader in providing opportunities for parent education about early literacy practices.

- **Singing.** Singing happens during storytime, but it also happens when performers come to the library—many of whom encourage audience participation. Collaborating with community partners to sponsor a family concert at a venue outside the library or in a local park can help the library cast a wider net to get families excited about singing with their emerging readers and learn about the library’s role in providing early literacy experiences for families.
- **Storytimes.** These can happen anywhere in the community; go where the people are. Consider places where public transportation is limited, or pinpoint community locations that are highly trafficked. Members of this year’s Advocacy & Legislation committee have hosted storytimes at housing communities, city parks, grocery stores, hospitals, art galleries, farmers markets, and homeless shelters. I also know librarians who have performed at festivals, community centers, YMCAs, and even laundromats.

Summer Reading Programming

- **Promotion.** When librarians visit schools or farmers markets to promote summer reading, they don’t just encourage participation. They also educate parents and children on the importance of reading during summer and the library’s role in providing access to fun and engaging reading material. If your library has the resources, offer free books to successful participants and make more reading the incentive.
- **Circulation.** Today, more public libraries are offering mobile circulation options to their communities through book bikes and other means. Regular and consistent visits to community outposts that are far from the library affords patrons who don’t have easy access to the physical library the opportunity to borrow materials and become as invested in the library’s mission as patrons who live nearby. Also, visits to community-wide summer events like family festivals and farmers markets will centralize the importance of summer reading in community traditions and make it easier for kids to participate. StoryWalks³ in public parks also encourage reading together as a family and are active ways to encourage park visitors to



A great example of learning through play!

read during the summer. If families strolling through love the story, they might visit the library to borrow the book.

- **Sharing Stories.** In all the places you promote summer programming, share your success stories. Track summer reading participation and share the results at the end of the summer with the public schools you serve—let the kids feel a collective sense of accomplishment. Two summers ago, when I worked at the Needham (MA) Free Public Library, children added one LEGO block to a building for every two hours they read—there was one building for each elementary school, with a separate group for preschool, homeschool, and kids outside of the school district. As the structures grew bigger, people expressed excitement about just how much the community was reading. Images of the structures and a final LEGO count were sent to the public schools.

These are all just some ways summer programs stress the importance of literacy *and* libraries in community spaces. What are some outreach programs you or your library have done during the summer months? In what ways did you build relationships with various stakeholders during these programs? How did you share your success stories? How will you use outreach programming to increase your library’s advocacy feedback loop this summer? With so much going on, the summer is an excellent time to advocate for your library. &

References

1. “Types of Advocacy,” Everyday Advocacy, ALSC, accessed Jan. 27, 2019, www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy/be-informed/types-advocacy.
2. Anji Play was developed in Anji County, China by Cheng Xueqin. It is an internationally recognized philosophy of true play and approach to early learning. For more information, visit www.anjiplay.com.
3. The Storywalk Project was created by Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, VT and developed in collaboration with the Vermont Bicycle & Pedestrian Coalition and the Kellogg Hubbard Library.