

Libraries = Success

NJ Libraries and Schools Conquer Library Card Sign-Up Month

TIFFANY MCCLARY AND SHARON RAWLINS

Each September, the American Library Association (ALA) and libraries nationwide partner to promote Library Card Sign-Up Month. The goal is to remind community members, parents, students, teachers, and librarians about the importance of owning a library card, which is like a passport to vast book collections, digital resources, hands-on support, and much more.

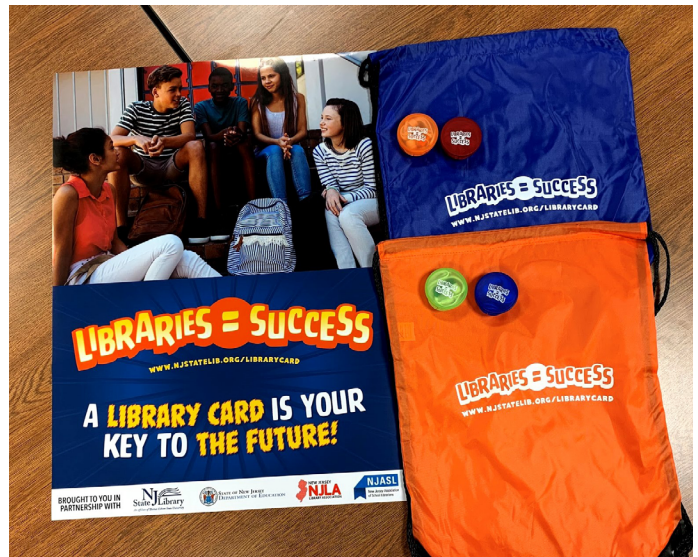
In 2019, staff at New Jersey State Library (NJSL) brainstormed ways to make the event extra special. We decided to create new partnerships and strengthen existing ones, so we collaborated with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA), and the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) to launch the *Libraries = Success* marketing campaign.

Together, our collaborators surveyed schools and librarians to gauge interest in the campaign; we partnered interested schools with their local community librarians, funded a research database for participants, and offered incentives to students who signed up for a card.

A public library in East Brunswick, New Jersey, took the campaign up a notch by encouraging teachers to sign up for library cards, too. These collaborative efforts resulted in nearly 2,500 new library cardholders in New Jersey. The *Libraries = Success* campaign was a reminder that libraries continue to thrive as we guide students toward academic success.

The Value in Libraries

We've all heard the trope that no one goes to libraries anymore. Many people don't think it's necessary to walk into a



Libraries = Success branded posters were hung in every participating school and library building, and book bags and earbuds were used as giveaway incentives for each student.

library in local communities or on school campuses because laptops and smartphones transmit information to us in seconds from anywhere we are. So, why bother?

As library lovers, we know better. The most compelling argument for public libraries is that we bridge the gap between information overload and patrons, particularly middle-grade students, who need help wading through the muddy waters of the internet. In these times when everyone and everything are vying for students' attentions, we must remind our communities that libraries are an educational support system for students of all ages, as well as key resources for anyone who wants to become more digitally literate.

One of libraries' best attributes is our commitment to providing equity of access. Despite the ubiquity of the internet and technology, some families have little to no financial means to consistently access these ever-changing tools. For students who don't have these resources at home, a free library card is vital to academic success and can be a passport to future economic stability.

Libraries enable students to take advantage of free internet and private workstations, often seven days a week. Additionally,



Tiffany McClary is Director of Communications, Marketing and Outreach and Sharon Rawlins is Youth Services Specialist at New Jersey State Library.

libraries offer a variety of youth and teen programming on everything from the latest YA book series, to 3D-model printing, to learning a foreign language, as well as summer reading programs that keep their reading skills strong. And no student ever has to navigate alone. At their library, they will always find the guidance and support they need.

ALA and libraries nationwide understand the imperative of promoting library services to people who, according to Pew Research studies, often don't know about all the valuable resources their local libraries offer.¹ This is why the nationwide library community celebrates Library Card Sign-Up Month every September. During this time, library staff join forces with educators to develop new ways to encourage parents, caregivers, and students to sign up for a library card. With a library card, students gain access to not only vast book collections in varied formats, but also a wide range of electronic resources and tools, research support, homework help, multimedia rentals, and more.

The Imperative of Partnerships

Using the slogan, "A library card is the key to your future," the goal for the statewide *Libraries = Success* marketing campaign was to encourage students and parents to make a library card the top item on their school supply list. While all students were encouraged to sign up for a library card, the campaign specifically targeted middle school students, sixth through eighth grades, as they embark on the journey toward becoming independent learners.

The collaboration strategy was to connect school districts to their community libraries, building new relationships and strengthening existing ones. This link between school libraries and local public libraries had a three-pronged effect. School libraries could place emphasis on the importance of libraries and encourage students to actively participate in public library events when they were away from the classroom.

Public libraries helped schools enhance their curricula, bringing teachers and students the latest tools and resources. The biggest benefit, of course, was for the students. These partnerships not only helped improve access to information for students, but they also improved academic growth and fostered a lifetime love of learning.

The collaboration strategy included a three-step approach to meet the goal. First, the NJSL surveyed the New Jersey library community to determine their interest in participating in the campaign. While we planned to pilot the program in a few communities, we decided to offer our incentives to all interested libraries in the state. The NJSL also identified relationships between school and public libraries that already existed and found scheduled back-to-school nights, the perfect events to promote the campaign.



Partners include representatives from the NJ State Library, NJ Library Association, NJ Department of Education, and Clayton Middle School.

When the campaign launched, forty-five public libraries partnered with fifty-one schools to joint-host library programs during September and October. NJSL's next step was to ensure public library staff participated in school-sponsored events, during which time they promoted the *Libraries = Success* campaign and their library's offerings.

Partnership between the school and the public library sends a message of unity. It shows that we both want what's best for the students so that they can succeed in school and in life. By working together, we ensure that they reap the benefits of our collaboration.

For the final step, the NJSL and the NJDOE allocated funding for the campaign. NJDOE funded the one-year provision of the EBSCO databases, Primary Search and Middle Search Plus. Schools were now able to provide students with access to research tools, such as magazines, encyclopedias, biographies, reference books, and images. These tools offered students tremendous access to relevant, timely information for their academic research projects.

During site visits at schools in Hainesport and Clayton, students showed NJSL and NJDOE officials how they used the database, and they explained how it made gaining access to information so much easier than they were used to. Additionally, NJSL funded an incentive giveaway. For the first one hundred students in each community who signed up for a library card, library staff gifted them with earbuds and bookbags. The earbuds were especially prized because, using their library cards, students could access and listen to audio content, for both entertainment and educational purposes.

The Results

From smartphones to tablets to media and other children, students have so much stimuli that pull their attention in many directions, so executing *Libraries = Success* was no easy feat. The NJSL realized that we had to discover multiple ways to engage students in the targeted age group. The East Brunswick Public Library (EBPL) established a seemingly simple, yet effective way to keep the conversation about the importance of libraries going. They engaged their teachers very early in the campaign. As teachers and students returned to school in August, the local public library persuaded ninety-two new teachers in the school district to sign up for library cards.

With the increased amount of support, public librarians leveraged their new relationships with teachers and school librarians to encourage students to use a new, online library card sign-up form. Aaron Pickett, head of youth services at EBPL said, "It was our first ever library card drive for middle schoolers, and now eight hundred more students have cards than on September 1st." Pickett explained the surge of new library cardholders motivated their library to create an entirely new online library card sign-up portal to enable students to apply for library cards online without needing their parent's signature.

This was a radical change from the previous protocol. Pickett said, "Kids now have the option of getting a card entirely without their parent's permission, if that needs to be the case. This policy was mainly crafted with the child's convenience in mind, but we were mindful that children should have a right to access library resources even if their parents did not want them to do so."

References

1. "Library Services in the Digital Age," Pew Research Center, January 22, 2013, www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/01/22/part-4-what-people-want-from-their-libraries.
2. "Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," American Library Association, July 26, 2006, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/minors.

The library found support for their decision from an ALA document called "Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights."² Instead of full service cards, Pickett said the library issues "Children's Provisional" cards, which allow youth under age eighteen to apply for a card in person with either proof of residency (mail in their name) or online with proof of school enrollment (school ID, printout of current schedule, etc.).

The library is working on a way to deliver these cards directly to schools to doubly ensure that the youth is currently enrolled. Parents are notified that their child was issued a library card along with a permission form that, if returned, will allow their child's card to be upgraded to a "full service" card.

Provisional cards need to be renewed yearly (not every three years like regular cards) and are limited to five checkouts at a time. To prevent incurring any financial liabilities, youth with these cards accrue no fines on any items. While lost items will block their cards, they are not sent to a collection agency. "As long as the lost items are eventually returned, their cards are cleared and can be used again," Pickett said.

By the end of the campaign, fifty-four *Libraries = Success* events were held across New Jersey, and 2,459 students signed up for new public library cards. The NJSL and its partners have and continue to ensure that we dispel the myth that technology is forcing libraries into obsolescence. Libraries are thriving and remain vibrant nerve centers of communities across New Jersey. &