

Act Boldly!

Working to Combat COVID Slide

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While libraries look cautiously, but optimistically, toward a post-pandemic next chapter, it is important to focus on students and their families grappling with the consequences of nearly two years of isolation, remote schooling, hybrid learning models, and relentless change.

Studies already indicate that COVID slide is real, disproportionately impacting students in high-needs communities.¹ Current forecasts suggest that the impact on children will vary according to geography, local politics, financial resources, the effects of structural racism, and population density. These factors, whose impact and import are already familiar to library leaders in rural, suburban, and urban settings, were thrown into sharp relief—and in many ways aggravated—by the pandemic.

The School Age Programs and Services committee proposes that libraries and librarians—key components of any community's ecosystem of learning—must act boldly to support students and their families in this sensitive period of recovery.

Through ALSC, we have well developed practical competencies, research-based models, and professional tools for serving children and families. We have committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and built those actions into our strategic plan. Our members are consciously embracing opportunities for growth for our young patrons, their families, and our services in the wake of the pandemic. Our experience in tackling summer slide and its impact on learning outcomes for school-age children is now expanding to include COVID slide—and we must use every tool in our toolbox.

The moment has come to pitch our ambitious dream projects to address the unprecedented challenges that our communities are facing—dreams like overhauling outreach to welcome historically marginalized audiences (including Spanish-speaking parents), lending technology learning kits, or inviting local artists and scientists to be STEAM mentors to children. Initiatives like these can be offered at scale, in big cities and rural one-room libraries.

As learning loss and COVID slide haven't been felt equally, resources need to be targeted to address structural inequities. At The New York Public Library, we launched a series in fall 2021 with a focus on historically marginalized neighborhoods. These include our in-person NYPL After School program, which offers daily free drop-in homework assistance, STEAM enrichment, and reading engagement activities for elementary school students, and our new program to lend STEAM kits with robotics, educational tools, and more. Both programs are designed specifically to engage communities that have historically had the poorest access to high-quality programs and resources.

Committee co-chair Stephanie Prato reports from the Simsbury Public Library (CT) that staff, understanding that children need the opportunities for learning, engagement, and social interaction that public libraries provide, have acted boldly this past summer and fall to bring back

in-person programs for children and their families. Simsbury Public Library is a midsize suburban library with a charter to serve an area of about twenty-three thousand people.

As Connecticut eased restrictions, the Children's Department piloted the return to in-person programming. Summer 2021 programs were carefully planned to create a safe and comfortable environment, and all events took place outside on the library's lawn. Programs were broken down into multiple sessions so groups were smaller and more spread out. The staff also found ways to minimize shared touch points. In the fall, staff extended in-person opportunities and brought programs back inside, minimizing scheduling disruptions due to weather and allowing for a more diverse range of activities. Fall programs focused on literacy and math skills in a fun, interactive way to help students who may have fallen behind during the pandemic.

"As an instructor of future school and youth services librarians, I will act boldly by highlighting and sharing the bold services of practicing librarians and encouraging them to act boldly themselves. I will support and help them act boldly whenever they need me to," says Valerie Byrd Fort, committee

member and instructor at the School of Information Science, University of South Carolina.

"As a school librarian, I am acting boldly by opening my school library during the summer. My students and parents are able to come in to get books, use technology and learn about our STEM projects," said committee member Cynthia Zervos, who emphasized the importance of access during the ongoing pandemic and expanding services during an uncertain time.

Providing creative, effective, and equitable library services to children is a bold act and vital step toward rebuilding our communities. Large-scale programs to address learning gaps like NYPL After School are essential to helping our children thrive in the coming years. Smaller libraries like Simsbury demonstrate the importance of maintaining flexibility to respond to children's changing circumstances. ALSC members have access to tools, training and experts that were built for this challenge and are working creatively across the country as appropriate to their community. While we have often been forced to be reactive during the pandemic, there is scope now to be proactive in our bold plans for the future. &

References

1. Matthew Boulay and Elizabeth McChesney, "What Will Summer Look Like? Summer Learning Loss and

COVID-19 Learning Gaps" *Children and Libraries* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5860/cal.E19.2.3>.