

Leading with Intent

Museums and Libraries and Collaboration, Oh My!

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More than two hundred children's museums in the United States support interactive learning opportunities for young children.¹ In contrast, there are more than 17,400 public libraries, including central, branch, and mobile libraries.²

However, some families do not benefit from these anchor institutions. Five main factors were found to impact individual use of public libraries alternatives, awareness, and understanding of universally free libraries or understanding them as only providing books, access hours operation, location and transportation, experience or not feeling comfortable, or previous bad experiences and interest.³

The Project

Through a Cooperative Agreement with the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Boston Children's Museum undertook the nationwide IMLS-funded Building a National Network of Museums and Libraries for School Readiness Project to address persistent gaps in early childhood education and school readiness.



A family at the Berkshire Athenæum "Me, You, We" Social Emotional Learning Program.

This work led to a guide *Building Supportive Communities: with Libraries, Museums and Early Childhood Systems*.⁴

The framework for the project evolved from three primary origins:

- direct work in the state of Massachusetts with the Boston Children's Museum
- work with IMLS to understand and craft intentional partnerships within states between museums and libraries
- state early childhood leaders with the BUILD Initiative.



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Taking it to the streets with the mobile outreach van from Harrison County (IN) Library System.

Over the three years of the project, library and museum teams in six states worked to build their local capacity through partnerships and coalitions to reach populations in their communities currently not being served. Staff from participating libraries and the museums engaged with project staff through conference calls, webinars, site visits and leadership institutes to share and learn approaches to intentionally seeking out children and families in their regions—especially those experiencing socio-economic hardship, non-English speaking, Native American, or dual language learners—to listen and respond to their interest in activities to support child growth, development, and family wellbeing.

Partnering to Reach Families

Existing relationships between the libraries and museums varied across the states. As a result of the project, they developed a shared interest and benefit to guide their work together.

South Carolina

Charleston County Public Library (CCPL), South Carolina State Library (SCSL), and the Children's Museum of the Lowcountry

(CML) are working together to reach economically disadvantaged communities, young mothers, those in foster care, and/or in rural areas. CCPL and CML have visited local neighborhoods to bring storytime and the museum's Pop-Up Tinker Shop to children when school is out of session. CCPL and CML also partnered to increase access and reduce barriers for families who may not be able to travel to downtown Charleston or afford parking.

The museum also provides free entry passes to library card holders and those who participate in our reading challenges. In addition to meeting the community where they are, CCPL, SCSL, and CML are providing trainings for the general public about early childhood development and for library staff across the state of South Carolina about the importance of play.

Iowa

The IMLS project has also strengthened the relationship between the Coralville (IA) Public Library and the Iowa Children's Museum. Initially, each organization worked independently to provide children's programming, but staff discovered that their reach into the community was wider when they worked together, sharing unique skill sets, resources, and connections.



Storytime at Brightview Village Apartments, downtown Charleston, SC.

The partners intentionally reached out to families and discovered that neither the library nor the museum were successfully marketing their services to the specific groups of bilingual children and families. Through grant funding, the museum worked with a translation service and bilingual staff to translate promotional documents for programs and literacy information into Arabic, French, and Spanish. The library's connection with HACAP Head Start blossomed into a partnering opportunity when museum staff joined monthly storytime, creating an educational, playful experience for all of the children.

Mississippi

The Harrison County (MS) Library System and Lynn Meadows Discovery Center are partnering to bring library and museum services to underserved populations. They selected a population of children and families within an income-restricted neighborhood located not far from both the organizations.

Due to the lack of sidewalks, bike lanes, or sufficient bus routes, families overwhelmingly reported transportation as a persistent barrier to participating in activities or services at both venues. The first solution to the transportation barrier was to bring services directly to the children in the form of books and learning kits on site in the residential community.

The second solution came in the form of collaboration with the local public bus company, Coast Transit Authority (CTA). On the last Friday of each month, the bus transports families to and from the neighborhood for a free night at the museum. The third solution came with the acquisition of a mobile library vehicle through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The vehicle now makes stops in the neighborhood twice a month and brings library services such as Wi-Fi and computer access, material checkout, and summer reading materials.

Massachusetts

Staff at the Berkshire Athenaeum (Pittsfield, MA) and Berkshire Museum have learned that communication isn't just a two-way street. They have learned through this process that community building and creating adaptive programming means continual and dynamic communication. Their partnership has required listening and sharing to tweak and align their expectations of each other, and their engaged families have come to expect the same sensitivity and flexibility. By working together and talking with participants, they are finding natural ways to bring social-emotional learning and STEM/STEAM concepts together. Furthermore, it has meant finding ways to welcome bilingual caregivers and children to programming.

New Mexico

Santa Fe (NM) Public Library was able to create a deep partnership with the Santa Fe Children’s Museum that went far beyond creating joint programming. Together, their organizations were able to pose the question, “Who are we not serving?”

By asking this question, they were able to create a support system for each other in their emphasis to serve the young children in Santa Fe and their caregivers. They will continue to ask questions about how they can better serve the community, and together, they can seek joint funding opportunities, create collaborative marketing and outreach, and garner community support to ensure they are broadening their audiences and helping remove barriers to participation. Listening to those who visit their libraries and museum is important, but intentionally looking to determine audiences missing from their programs to ensure they are providing support for all in their community is a key administrative practice.

Their offerings through this collaboration have allowed local organizations such as Many Mothers, Head Start, Kids Campus at Santa Fe Community College, and Growing Up New Mexico to use their shared museum and library spaces for their audiences.

Virginia

Richmond (VA) Public Library and The Children’s Museum of Richmond have a long history of partnering, but this project deepened that partnership by cross connecting with families in intentional ways. Both organizations have a mission to support caregivers and young children, so it was easy to find new ways to reinforce their shared message.

References

1. Nikki Jan, “Top 30 Best Children’s Museums in the USA You Must Visit in 2023,” Attractions of America, last updated March 2, 2023, <https://www.attractionsofamerica.com/travel/best-childrens-museums-usa.php>.
2. Dimitrije Curcic, “Number of Libraries in the US,” Wordsrated, March 1, 2023, <https://wordsrated.com/number-of-libraries-in-the-us/>.
3. “Who Doesn’t Use Public Libraries? And Why?,” *ALALibrarYSE*

(blog), February 17, 2023, <https://www.analibraryse.com/blog/who-doesnt-use-public-libraries-and-why>.

They used funding for mutual benefit by purchasing the book *In Kindergarten*, created by the Berkshire Museum (also a participant in the project), to distribute through the library, through schools, and through joint Kindergarten Readiness events. The museum hosts two events and the library hosts an additional six events.

At each event, they will have cross-representation of museums and libraries. The library will offer library cards at the museum events and the museum will attend and provide bilingual support at half of the library events. They have co-planned all the events and have submitted an IMLS proposal for expansion of these types of events and supports in the future.

Lessons Learned

With limited staffing capacity, the biggest challenge has been finding time to meet and align. They love working smarter and sharing the load. This project has made them more intentional about seeking and responding to family voice and some of the new approaches are a direct result of what they have heard from the families.

Participants have indicated that when libraries partner with museums and other local organizations it extends and amplifies what they are able to achieve. Libraries increase the number of families they are able to engage and can tailor the programs and services they are able to provide to be responsive to families. Through broadening their knowledge and practices around how to better engage families in feedback loops, libraries have the opportunity to reach families in their community currently not benefiting from the range of services they offer. &

4. Build Initiative and Institute of Museum and Library Services, “BUILDing Supportive Communities with Libraries, Museums, and Early Childhood Systems: A Toolkit for Collaborative Efforts to Improve Outcomes for Young Children and Their Families,” 2018, https://buildinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Build_IMLS_ToolkitWEB1.pdf.