

1,000 Books

More than Just a Reading Challenge

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Enter the bustling Lodewick Children's Library at the Ridgefield Library in Ridgefield, CT, and you will notice a few things at once—a colorfully decorated service desk, a large freshwater fish tank, my office window displaying hundreds of little toys and baubles, and a whole lot of red bags.

The red bags are our very popular and highly circulating 1,000 Books before Kindergarten (1KBBK) Collection. This is Ridgefield Library's unique physical collection of picture book titles that accompany the challenge. This collection consists of one hundred red totes, each containing ten curated books surrounding a theme. Each tote is accompanied by an extension activity, nursery rhyme or poem, tips for reading with children, a breakdown of the anatomy of a picture book and how to engage young readers in exploring the art.

The 1,000 Books before Kindergarten Challenge is a Nevada-based non-profit organization developed to promote early literacy skills by providing a foundation for caregivers to best prepare children for academic success. While the concept of improving literacy skills by reading 1,000 books to children is not unique to the foundation, their framework, resources, and tracking have made it easier for libraries, caregivers, and other organizations to adopt this as a program.

Since Ridgefield Library launched the 1KBBK collection and the accompanying reading challenge in September 2022, we have seen a steady increase in the circulation of these totes. To date in July 2024, the totes have about four thousand collective circulations, which trends to about two thousand circulations a year.

The circulation data underscores the qualitative feedback received from patrons. Ridgefield patrons have been overwhelmingly



positive about how the library has designed the initiative to be accessible with an easy entry into participation. We receive daily positive reinforcement from our patrons that our curation has enabled them to grab and go, freeing up time and mental energy that better allows them to commit to reading books to and with their children. And they appreciate the ease of selecting a bag on a theme, regardless of their family's active participation in the reading challenge.

Ridgefield is a town of about twenty-five-thousand and we average around twelve hundred participants for the library's annual summer reading challenges. Ridgefield Library currently has about three hundred families formally registered through the



Kristina Lareau has been the Head of Children's Services at Ridgefield (CT) Library since 2017. She has an MS in Library Science and an MA in Children's Literature from Simmons University and has set out to use humor, creativity, and empathy to create open and welcoming environments for both library patrons and staff.

Beanstack tracker. We offer our families several different means of tracking to make it as easy as possible for them to participate. Patrons receive a folder upon registration that contains a combination of in-house made materials (Ridgefield branded bubble-fill book counter, sticker tracker for each one hundred books read, tips for reading with children) as well as official materials developed by the 1,000 Books before Kindergarten Foundation (coloring sheets, reading tips and information, bookmark). When our young Ridgefield readers complete the challenge, they are invited to pose wearing a bright red graduation cap and gown, a sign and their well-earned prize: a backpack with both the library's logo and a 1KBBK patch.

How It All Began

In 2016, I was a children's librarian at Fairfield Public Library in Fairfield, CT, and I first began a 1,000 Books before Kindergarten collection. I created the framework while serving Fairfield and later was able to build off it when I became the Head of Children's Services in Ridgefield. The main difference is that I began the project in Fairfield without a guaranteed means of funding the project.

Building a curated list is both extremely fun and incredibly challenging. I solicited recommendations from the other children's staff, scoured resources, and generated the first curated list of one hundred themed bags. The primary goal was to create an easy means of reader's advisory for parents by offering them a rough survey of children's picture books.

I created the inserts and branding and began the arduous process of soliciting books from our Amazon Wishlist, donations to the Friends group, and partnering with the Fairfield University Bookstore for a book drive. By the time I relocated to Ridgefield Library in 2017, Fairfield Public Library had solicited about a quarter of the necessary titles. By 2018, the project was launched with the support of the Friends of Fairfield Public Library and a special fund earmarked for children's projects.

Interested in the success and longevity of the 1KBBK collection and program in Fairfield, I met with Tamara Lyhne, Head of Children's Services at Fairfield Public Library. While Fairfield offers an online tracking system in Beanstack, they find that their patrons are more interested in the collection for convenience rather than to engage in the reading challenge.

Fairfield's collection of 1KBBK bags has averaged about 1,445 circulations a year between 2018 and 2023. (*Note: That includes the reduced circulation numbers that affected all libraries in 2020 because of the pandemic.*) Lyhne has also added thirteen duplicate bags of the most popular themes to accommodate demand and recently re-packaged the collection in more attractive and robust bags. Six years after the implementation of the 1KBBK collection, it has not only grown in size, but remains a popular and top-performing collection.

The Ridgefield Proposal

I knew very early that I wanted to iterate the 1KBBK process in Ridgefield. I had already created a framework of titles, songs, rhymes, research, and organization. Luckily, one of the library's small restricted funds had unexpected returns with a post-pandemic fluctuating stock market, allowing us to fully commit to funding the project in Ridgefield. I would be able to see this project through from inception to patron graduation.

My desired outcomes for the 1KBBK project in Ridgefield are similar to those in Fairfield, to:

- Encourage caregivers to actively promote early literacy at home
- Increase circulation by offering pre-packaged themed titles
- Assist with reader's advisory by offering themed bags

I added secondary goals to the Ridgefield proposal to take quality, diversity, and representation into account when developing the list of 1,000 books.

Here are the diversity and inclusion metrics that I proposed:

Across the 1,000 books included in this project, our *minimum* goal for diversity and inclusion is the percentage representation of historically underrepresented or disadvantaged groups based upon the 2020 Census and Gallup Poll information.

This information will be uploaded to the IMLS-created Collection Analysis Tool on Diverse BookFinder¹ to generate a report of multicultural titles that will serve as the basis for racial, cultural, and language representation. In addition to racial and cultural groups recorded by national census information, the representation of persons with a disability, who identify as LGBTQ, and persons in poverty will be researched for inclusion.

Action Steps and Timeline

- September-November 2021: Audit list from Fairfield to determine quality, diversity of titles, themes, authors, and protagonists then develop a list of titles released since 2016 that would be candidates for inclusion.
- November 2021-March 2022: Begin book ordering twenty-five bags a month until February 2022, begin organizing titles into the themed bags and creating the materials to include in each tote.
- April 2022-June 2022: Develop an ongoing reading initiative program for patron logging, cataloging, marketing push.
- Launch either June 2022 or September 2022 (either with the start of Summer Reading or start of Back to School)

Estimated Costs

- Books: \$14,000
- Bags: \$1,000
- Incentives: \$800
- Supplies (printouts, laminating, processing): \$250

The Challenges of Doing the Work

With a solid proposal, plan, and budget, it took us about a year from start to finish to complete this project. One of my earliest challenges was the lack of diversity in the picture book market in 2016. The data collected by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) and presented in their chart for "Children's and YA Books Received by the CCBC, by and/or about Black, Indigenous and People of Color, Publication Year 2018-present" shows a clear, though gradual, increase in the representation of non-white authors and characters.²

With the assistance of staff and colleagues, we researched titles to represent diverse characters and creators for the various themes; however, even with excellent resources such as Diverse BookFinder, We Need Diverse Books, The Brown Bookshelf, The Conscious Kid, Black Children's Books and Authors, Let's Talk Picture Books and American Indians in Children's Literature, it was difficult to meet the metrics I envisioned. We fell short of every diversity goal, but I am confident in the quality, diversity, and variety of titles curated for this collection—based on the titles we could realistically acquire from our vendors at the time of the project. Hopefully we will continue to see an upward trend in the number of diverse materials published for children that will enable such goals to be met in the future.

The other challenge we faced was organizing our titles into their thematic bags. While we developed a list of themes, we had to change, mix and match, and sometimes outright dissolve a

theme. We also aimed to "mature" the totes if read in order—so bags one to ten are geared towards the youngest readers, and bags ninety-one to one hundred had broader and deeper themes like "Perspective" and "School Days."

Essentially, this was a big literary puzzle. Sometimes our theme had an abundance of quality titles like "Seasons: Summer," others were more difficult to fill out like "Achoo: Feeling Sick." Still other themed totes were created by books that were slated for inclusion that did not really fit in with other themes but felt as though they should be grouped together like "Sweet Stories" or "Books that Feel Like Fairy Tales." Some themes had overlap like "Moon" and "Bedtime," where titles were swapped in and out to find the best balance.

Conclusion

Any library can participate in the 1,000 Books before Kindergarten Challenge—the framework, materials, and resources are all readily and freely available from the 1,000 Books before Kindergarten Foundation's website (www.1000booksbeforekindergarten.org). There are nominal costs to purchase reward stickers or promotional materials, but the program itself is adaptable and flexible to any budget.

Adding a 1KBBK circulating collection not only encourages participation in the reading challenge but provides a valuable service to the community. The collection serves as a reader's advisory tool and resource for patrons seeking specific topics for classes or interests, an easy entry into the world of children's literature, and a convenience for patrons that enables them to build library visits into their weekly routines.

I hope the successes at both Fairfield and Ridgefield will encourage and inspire other libraries to use this as a model for early literacy engagement, to increase circulation, offer an elevated user experience, and create lifelong learners and library users in both children and caregivers. &

References

1. "Collection Analysis Tool," Diverse BookFinder, accessed July 28, 2024, <https://cat.diversebookfinder.org/>.
2. "Books by and/or about Black, Indigenous and People of Color (All Years)," Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of

Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, last updated March 20, 2024, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-about-poc-fnn/>.