

A Smorgasbord of Possibilities

How Maryland Libraries Address Their Charge

DOROTHY STOLTZ

A funny thing happened in the race to the top of the hill. The fast-paced Hare got distracted and smelled the flowers and sipped lemonade. Striving to do his steady best, Tortoise marched forward a step at a time. Hare felt like taking a nap and did. When he woke up it was too late—Tortoise had, not surprisingly, won the race.

Libraries must remember to emulate Tortoise as we proceed steadily, but deliberately, toward implementing the ideals of the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant project and keep our focus on the goal—the enjoyment of lifelong learning.

“Public libraries play a practical and strategic role in the fulfillment of this goal,” said Irene Padilla, assistant superintendent for the Maryland Department of Education Division of Library Development and Services. This project builds on a decade of early childhood initiatives by libraries and ongoing support from the Institute for Museum and Library Services through the Division of Library Development and Services. We can find inventive ways to support our teammate in this race—the schools—and strengthen community results gradually but successfully through the years.

Maryland is one of nine states to receive an Early Learning Challenge grant that falls under the current Race to the Top federal education program. What does a deliberate and steady pace—to help families inspire their young children to learn and be ready for school—look like for libraries? Let’s take a peek.

The room is humming with excitement and delight. Parents and children, library staff, and community partners are chattering away and enjoying dinner together. Afterward, the kids march

into the next room for play activities. A mother proudly tells her library story:

“Being homeless a few short years ago I got into the routine of bringing my children into the library each day. One day before we got to the library Miss Sue [from the check-out desk] was walking down the street on her lunch break. She greeted us, ‘Hello, how are you? Will we see you in the library later today?’ She talked to us as if we were any other family that goes to the library. That conversation was a turning point in my life. I began to think of myself in a more optimistic and confident way. In time, I was able to get out of a troubled marriage and move into an apartment with my children.”

This true story shows how far a gesture of goodwill and compassion can lead and the power and potential of libraries to touch local communities. This “library family café” program is a discussion program loosely based on Illinois’ Strengthening Families model, Love is Not Enough Parent Cafes. In the Maryland library world, we fondly refer to our version as the Book Bistro. These programs exemplify the effort by Maryland libraries to engage families in new and refreshing ways. Library conversation starters are designed to help parents focus discussion around lifelong

Dorothy Stoltz is Programming and Outreach Services Manager at Carroll County Public Library in Westminster, Maryland. Her latest book is about incorporating play into libraries by designing early learning spaces and will be published by ALA Editions later this year. The author thanks the following for their help in writing this article: Kathleen Reif, Paula Isett, Marisa Conner, Janis Cooker, Amanda Courie, and Janet Vogel.



Libraries are winning the hearts of families at the Carroll County (MD) Public Library, Westminster Branch.

learning and how to convey their excitement of learning to their children. It's also a golden opportunity to ask parents how can the library better serve families. It is one example of how libraries can pursue a role in the Early Learning Challenge initiative.

From an historic perspective, libraries have come a long way. In the 1940s, public libraries began targeting service to children with missionary zeal. Librarians created opportunities for children of all ages to discover and learn at the library, in large part by pointing children to the world of books. Read-aloud programs and storytimes were commonly offered as a way to help children develop a love of reading. An exciting role bubbled up out of this effort as librarians focused on younger children—the library as a preschooler's door to learning.

In the 1980s, libraries began to extend the common storytime age of three- to five-year-olds to offer storytimes for babies and toddlers as well. Since the 1990s, Maryland libraries have gone beyond this traditional role and discovered their potential to support parents to help their young children become ready for school.

Librarians have focused on understanding brain development and early learning, guiding and supporting parents, appreciating the economic value of reaching young children as a good long-

term investment, and recognizing the significance of “being at the table” with public officials and community partners.

“Libraries do their best work for children birth to five in collaboration with parents, caregivers, community agencies, and public officials,” suggested Stephanie Shauck, retired youth specialist for the Maryland Department of Education Division of Library Development and Services. “If you are not already attending community meetings, begin creating opportunities to increase your presence and knowledge. If you don't know who your partners are, go out and find them. If you are not engaging your parents in conversations before and after storytime, do so with quiet enthusiasm. You are the experts.”

Gail Griffith, coordinator for Maryland's Library Associate Training Institute, added, “If you are not well-versed in a baby's brain development or the economic value of serving young children, we will train and support you. You are the library's best link to building collaborations in order to help children become ready for school.”

In the last twelve years, Maryland has taken the road less traveled by actively and creatively building state collaborations. Besides libraries and schools, another key partner stepping up to participate is Ready at Five, a self-sustain-

ing, board-designated program of the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education. The Maryland Department of Education, which created one of the first early childhood divisions within a state department of education, was also the first to include an office of child care. As a result, these entities talk to each other more easily and are getting things done more efficiently.

Johns Hopkins reading specialists were hired to train librarians in early literacy, with the expectation that they would train and coach other librarians. Carroll County (MD) Public Library spearheaded the first library research-tested study in the country that demonstrated a statistical correlation between the training of adults by librarians and the improvement of children's early literacy skills, funded by a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services through the Division of Library Development and Services. In 2010, a permanent seat for a public librarian was established on the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC). Following the ECAC framework, local jurisdictions are including the public library on their councils.

Slow but Steady Wins the Hearts of Families

These significant changes elevated the importance of Maryland libraries in several ways. "Public libraries have expanded their expertise, capability, and credibility to serve very young children and their parents and caregivers," said Elaine Czarnecki, reading specialist and literacy consultant. Librarians challenge themselves to determine what is going well, what can be done differently to be more effective, and how to set right priorities. They are skilled at collaborating with others and poised to create opportunities in playing a larger role locally and at the state level. They are not only at the table, but helping to set the table and serve families a smorgasbord of possibilities.

Two popular workshops at a recent Maryland Library Association conference reflect the ongoing professional development that helps librarians focus on redefining their role—how to train adults to foster school readiness and how to incorporate social and emotional development into storytimes.

"Scientists are applying imaging equipment in new ways to help us understand the development of a young brain. An image can show deep and stunning activity of a baby's brain. It

demonstrates on a new level why the early years are so important," said Connie Wilson, early literacy presenter. "This technology is called Magnetoencephalography—MEG for short. MEG is completely safe and looks like a hairdryer from Mars. These images and findings will lead to the design of environments that maximize learning, taking into account differences among individuals. Librarians need to stay on top of these latest findings."

Valerie Smirlock, consultant for the department of education, said,

"Librarians have the perfect opportunity in storytime sessions to shape interaction with children in such a way as to promote social and emotional skills. By connecting parents to local resources, librarians can also encourage parents as they help their young children develop self-regulation skills, the most important skills for children entering school. Can the children sit still? Do they get along and share with others? Are they beginning to identify and express their emotions? Can they follow directions? Having these kinds of conversations with families in a non-threatening place like the library can effectively get more parents the kind of support they need around challenging behaviors and appropriate social and emotional skill building."

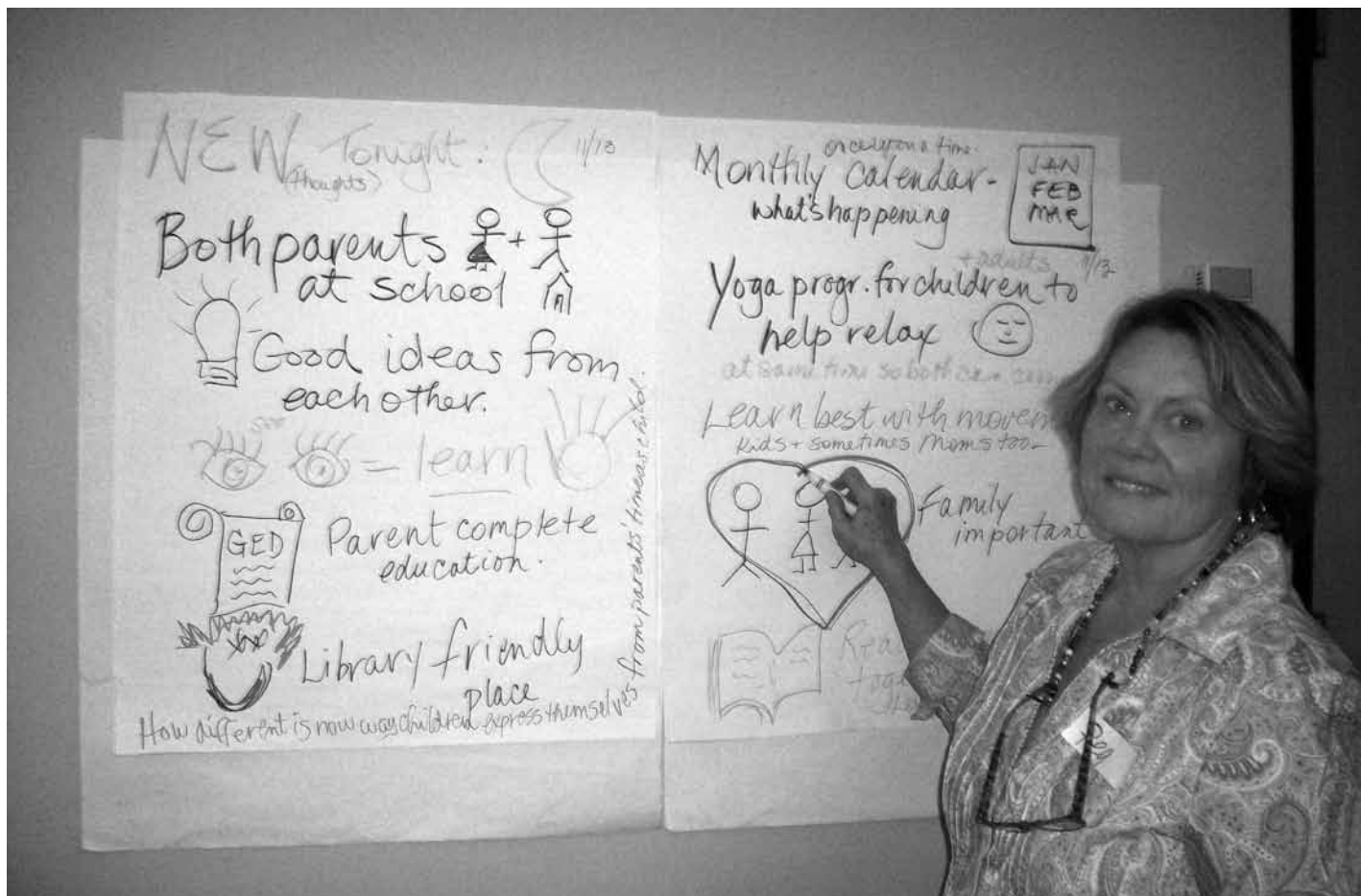
Two popular workshops at a recent Maryland Library Association conference reflect the ongoing professional development that helps librarians focus on redefining their role—how to train adults to foster school readiness and how to incorporate social and emotional development into storytimes.

In these ways, Maryland libraries have joined the race to the top along with many state and local early childhood partners. The state's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) developed ten projects for the Early Learning Challenge grant application. The grant specifically requires communities to target families in Title 1 school districts, families who are English Language Learners, and families with children with disabilities. The council incorporated public libraries in two of the projects: a local ECAC must be established in each jurisdiction, and it must include a public librarian, and family engagement activities will support parents in helping their children start school ready to learn.

The grant proposal regarding libraries was written to minimize unrealistic requirements and reduce red tape. Five libraries participated in the "roll out" in the first year of the grant. Each year—over the four years of the grant period—more libraries will join the initiative until all Maryland libraries are involved.

Library grant requirements consist of only two components. They are simple, yet effective:

1. establish a "library family council" to meet at least twice a year (the family café idea), and



Carroll County (MD) Public Library Programming Specialist Peg Pond captures discussion highlights at a library family café program.

2. create a parent information kiosk inside the children's area displaying brochures of community partners and other school readiness information. Each library receives \$700 to support these efforts.

Engaging Community Partners

The Division of Library Development and Services at the Maryland State Department of Education oversees the steady pace of public libraries' participation in the grant. The initiative has given libraries an excellent framework to expand outreach to community partners and families producing unintended positive results—like the homeless mother who was comfortable telling her inspirational library story.

Schools and agencies are taking advantage of library service, assisting with the planning and delivery of family café programs and workshops, such as the nationally acclaimed Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, and requesting and suggesting other types of library activities. Partners are going above and beyond to bring families to the library and are calling on librarians to assist with their events and present parent workshops in their agency settings.

Community partners are—privately and publicly—turning to libraries to fill their missions. Places like the Judy Center—a



Maryland school-based program focused on school readiness—along with Head Start and other agencies are seeing libraries in a new light. They now realize that the library can be neutral ground where librarians encourage parents and children to learn and discover together, without concern for assessments, testing, and parent “conference” meetings.

Engaging Families

At family café discussions, librarians take the time to have conversations with parents. These rejuvenating conversations are asset-focused, not problem-oriented. Families discover that they can be comfortable, confident, and relaxed in the library

and talk about their children with optimism and joy. They are outspoken about their interest in and ability to be lifelong learners and how to excite their children about learning.

A group of Spanish-speaking families said, “We are ferociously learning English every way we can. One of the most useful ways is by reading children’s books out loud to our children. Our children are teaching us new words. We are all learning together.”

Parents express their delight and are truly grateful for the programs and workshops offered by the library. One parent observed, “I didn’t know that everything was free! The library is a wonderful place to bring my children. The librarians are helpful and answer our questions.”

At the family café, parents offer support to each other in terms of ideas for school readiness and referrals to other services. One mother said, “Our daughter is very shy and wants to only be with Mom and Dad. She does not want to be with other children or adults. We came today because we want to gradually get her comfortable in new settings so she’ll like kindergarten next year.” Another family recommended looking into Head Start because it helped their son.

Libraries are Figuring It Out!

Serving families with high needs—educational, financial, and emotional—often does not yield the same high statistics as other library programs. However, offering library opportunities to these families is part of serving the community.

Lynn Wheeler, Carroll County Maryland library director said, “Libraries are figuring out the right balance. This is important

work too. It is not social work; it is not family therapy; it is not trying to save the world. We are finding realistic ways to serve high needs families with a bit of kindness, compassion, and goodwill without reducing support for other services.”

For deeply troubled parents, making referrals, to social work-type agencies has been a successful method. Our relationship goal is to be professional and amiable without becoming drinking or shopping buddies.

A group of Spanish-speaking families said, “We are ferociously learning English every way we can. One of the most useful ways is by reading children’s books out loud to our children. Our children are teaching us new words. We are all learning together.”

Establishing relationships with families and—at the pace of the Tortoise—*steadily* building upon them is a key strategy. Facilitating conversations with families that keep communication upbeat is a prized skill Maryland librarians are developing. If parents start talking about an intense family issue, we gently steer the

conversation back to learning opportunities and library services. Most parents are happy to stay upbeat and positive.

At this stage of the race, libraries are discovering the right balance within each community between maintaining and sustaining quality services that support “low needs” families while at the same time intentionally directing a portion of their resources to target “high needs” families.

Maryland libraries are making progress and going at the right pace. The Early Learning Challenge initiative has given libraries the freedom and flexibility to focus resources to support “high needs” families without jeopardizing Maryland’s library vision to help every family inspire their children to enjoy learning.

Aesop got it right! Tortoise with his broad public library vision to encourage the enjoyment of lifelong learning stays the course and is always moving ahead. 🐢