

# From Home to Library Visits: How High Plains Libraries are Supporting Parents in Early Literacy

*"The feeling of the library before and after SPELL is quite different; almost like a breath of fresh air came through and refreshed our work with children and focus on community."*

– Children's Librarian

The SPELL blueprint was created to assist library staff in their effort to support caregivers in practicing early literacy techniques with their children. In November 2014, eight libraries in Colorado were selected to implement the blueprint in their communities. Each library created a programming prototype that guided the library in collaborating with community partners, and providing outreach to low income and high need communities.

## Community

The High Plains Library District serves a diverse community that includes a large migrant population that came to the area because of available jobs in meat packaging and the oil and gas industry. The City of Greeley's population of 100,883 is comprised of 59% White, 36% Latino/a, 2% Black or African American, and 3% two or more races. Fifty-two percent of K-12 students are minority and 10% of parents are foreign born. Fifty-four percent of households have children under the age of 18. With a median annual income of \$42,321, 13% of the city's residents live below the poverty line. Based on the parent surveys, languages spoken at home include: 85% English and 62% Spanish as well as Arabic, Somali, Mandarin, Burmese, Chin, and Karenni.

## Prototype

High Plains Library District (HPLD) staff partnered with Family Connects, an organization that conducts home visits to high need families. Family Connects supports low income, high need families through two programs, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschoolers (HIPPY) and Parents as Teacher (PAT). HIPPY serves families with 3-5 year olds, while PAT works with families from pregnancy through toddlerhood. These two programs use a predetermined curriculum, which includes a section on supporting early literacy. Home visits occur in the parents' native language with English supports given as needed. This partnership included the following activities:

- Family Connects staff trained HPLD staff on the impact of social-emotional skills on literacy and how to work with English language learners.
- HPLD staff trained Family Connects staff on how to support early literacy efforts.
- Family Connects assisted in the translation of library signage.
- HPLD staff held 23 library orientations for HIPPY and PAT families that included a tote bag with a picture book, a library tour, and storytime with snacks for their children.

- During 99 home visits, Family Connects staff modeled early literacy strategies and enrolled parents in the library's 1000 Books before Kindergarten Program.
- At HIPPY and PAT family graduations HPLD staff gave a short presentation on early literacy that included *Every Child Ready to Read*®. Staff also held a storytime for the families.
- HPLD staff attended Family Connects' annual carnival and early literacy fair held at the Family Connects headquarters in Greeley. Staff brought the HPLD bookmobile to the event to raise awareness about their mobile library program. Bookmobile staff is now modifying their summer schedule to increase visibility in neighborhoods served by Family Connects.
- Throughout the year, 162 caregivers and 158 children participated in events.
- Based on the SPELL Blueprint the library eliminated fines for children's materials.

While initially focusing on early literacy, the partnership has expanded to include computer classes, citizenship classes, resume writing workshops, translation supports, and issuing new library cards. This collaboration has created a bridge from the community to the library that has aided many families in need.

## Resources

Financial resources for this project came from two sources: \$9,000 from a National Leadership Grant distributed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and \$27,911 in matching funds.

With these funds, the library purchased 1,463 books for children, 48 manipulatives, 150 book bags, 155 early literacy games, and snacks for library orientations. HPLD staff printed and distributed 200 informational materials on early literacy and 966 promotional materials. A set of Eric Carle books were given to each family that graduated from the HIPPY and PAT programs.

## Parent Survey Results

A total of 41 parents completed a pre-program survey. Results from this survey include:

- 100% of respondents agree the library is a welcoming place for them and their children.
- 68% know how children learn to read.
- 73% are confident in helping their child to be ready to read in kindergarten.
- 63% know what everyday activities to do with their child to help them be ready to learn how to read in kindergarten.
- 65% have a regular routine for reading books.
- 80% agree the library is a place they can come to play with their child.
- 95% agree the library is a place they can come to learn with their child.
- 63% are familiar with the activities the library offers for families with young children (ages 0-3).
- 85% plan to attend library events for families of young children (ages 0-3) in the future.

- 43% read to their child several times a day, 33% said once a day, 8% said 4-6 days a week, and 15.4% said 2-3 days a week.
- 88% talk to their baby several times a day, 5% once a day.
- 37% sing with their child several times a day, 32% once a day, 15% said 4-6 days a week, 10% said 2-3 days a week, 7% said once a week.
- 71% encourage their child to play with their hands several times a day, 15% once a day, 10% said 4-6 days a week, and 2% said 2-3 days a week.
- 61% play with their child in a way that helps them explore their surroundings several times a day, 20% said once a day, 5% said 4-6 days a week, 7% said 2-3 days a week, 2% said once per week or less.
- When asked what activities the parents engaged in at the library, 70% reported using a computer, 68% attended a storytime, 43% participated in a family program, 83% found a book for themselves or for someone else, and 10% met with a librarian to learn about computers or other technology topics.
- 95% have library cards
- 40% of families report having 51 or more books at home, 35% have 26-50 books, 15% have 11-25 books, 8% have 3-10 books, and 3% have 1-2 books.

## Success Stories

HPLD staff now has the ability to *directly* serve low income families through their partnership with Family Connects. For example, parents who speak Chin and Karenni became connected to free pre-GED classes after learning about them during library tours.

Families loved exploring the bookmobile and a 14 month old in the PAT program knows that when their book bag is in the car it means they are going to get new books!

One caregiver joined a book club that meets weekly at the library, expanding her social circles and increasing the amount she reads for her own enjoyment. She has also started bringing her 6 month old and 20 month old to storytime.

A caregiver is excited to take her children to the library because it is located in their neighborhood. During a home visit with Family Connects staff the caregiver showed them a stack of books she had checked out as well as the storytime schedule on her refrigerator. They plan on going to the library on a more regular basis!

Children were ecstatic when they received their Eric Carle books upon graduating from the HIPPY and PAT programs. Each student and parent pair was recognized individually, and was presented the box set along with their graduation medals. Many of the students went back to their seats and began reading their books. Some of them shared their books with younger siblings.

## Lessons learned

Much attention was given to establishing a timeline for HPLD and Family Connects programming. The library is busy with summer reading in the summer and HIPPY tends to

be busy in the fall. To do more in the future, the library plans to start earlier and plan summer activities in more detail ahead of time.

HPLD staff recommends that those who are interested in planning a similar project should look for established groups that are passionate about their work and are willing to be fully engaged in the program and are flexible and open to change. Partners should work together to create specific goals and start small; it's easier to expand than to overcommit up front.

Bookmobile staff shared their challenges with language barriers. They encountered at least five different languages that neither staff member spoke. Bringing the bookmobile to events with large crowds was also challenging because it was difficult to demonstrate how to use the bookmobile.

## What's next?

HPLD and Family Connects began their project with a focus on making the project manageable for both groups, being reasonable with resources and expectations, and, most importantly, sustainable for the future. As the grant-period for the project ends, HPLD and Family Connects are expanding their programs and partnership to provide educational resources and library support to additional families.

