

# Driving the Library to Families: How Montrose Libraries are Supporting Parents in Early Literacy

*"I love that these families who are reporting to only have 5-10 books at home are coming every week to bring home another 5-10 books (plus puppets, literacy tips!) and playing the reading game!"*

- 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

Montrose County's population of 40,946 is comprised of 76% White, 21% Latino/a, and 2% two or more races. Forty two percent of K-12 students are minority. Twenty eight percent of households have children under the age of 18. With a median annual income of \$33,750, 15% of the county's residents live below the poverty line.

## Prototype

The Montrose Regional Library District (MRLD) partnered with the Montrose County School District RE-1J Early Childhood Center (MECC) for their project. MECC currently enrolls 230 children. Once a week, MRLD staff took their bookmobile to MECC during parent pickup times to create a more convenient way for families with young children to access the library.

The Montrose librarians were anxious to use their bookmobile to reach out to families with children ages birth to three. Their goal was two-fold: find a location where caregivers and children come together, and provide easy access to the resources the library has to offer. In addition to issuing 144 new library cards, parents could check out materials, and fines for children's materials were eliminated. The library staff also supported Spanish-speaking patrons by using translators from the childcare center to help facilitate conversations. Library staff created themed Buddy Bags for checkout, these included books, manipulatives, and a flier with early literacy activities. A game board was created to help children track how many books they read; after completing the game children would choose prizes from a Treasure Chest and take home a free book. The partnership was very successful and yielded participation as high as 120 visitors at the bookmobile in an hour. The bookmobile received a total of 870 visits from caregivers and 1,794 visits from children throughout the year.

During the 42 bookmobile visits, library staff talked with parents/caregivers and children about the importance of reading, explained the reading game, and emphasized that reading is FUN. Library staff also spoke with parents and childcare teachers about early literacy skills and introduced them to various library services. The childcare teachers were especially interested in the library's collections and created individualized recommendations for parents based on their children's needs.

Two roundtable discussions brought library staff together with MECC teachers and staff to discuss early literacy needs and strategies. Plans were made to promote the bookmobile to parents and children. The librarians also encouraged childcare staff to talk with parents about the advantages of visiting the bookmobile (no fines, easy to get a card, Spanish speaker on board, waiving old fines/fees, etc.).

The library offered two literacy nights at MECC where library staff and teachers modeled Read, Write, Talk, Sing, and Play activities and explained the developmental importance of each. Families received informational handouts on early literacy. Mini storytime events were also held. Seventy families attended each Literacy Night.

## Resources

Financial resources for this project came from two sources: \$12,000 from a National Leadership Grant distributed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and \$11,789 in matching funds.

With these funds, the library supported the bookmobile's costs for their weekly stop at the Montrose Early Childhood Center. MRLD staff enhanced the bookmobile collection, purchasing 175 books for parents and 729 books for 0-5 year old children. They also purchased 345 manipulatives to add to book bags and other literacy aids available for check out. Approximately 780 informational handouts on early literacy and 1,550 promotional materials were printed and distributed. Giveaways (books, informational materials) were purchased for children and parents attending library programs. Two book carts, a computer, and a computer bag were also purchased to support the bookmobile.

## Parent Survey Results

A total of 30 parents took surveys before and 15 after the program to assess the impact and better understand the community. The survey results indicated that the number of Montrose families with library cards significantly increased after the bookmobile visits. Results from the post-program survey also included:

- 71% agree that they know how children learn to read.
- 71% are confident in helping their child(ren) to be ready to read in kindergarten.
- 64% know what everyday activities to do with their child(ren) to help them to be ready to learn how to read in kindergarten.
- 79% have a regular routine for reading books.

- 27% read to their child(ren) several times a day, 33% said once a day, 20% said 4-6 days a week, 7% said 2-3 days a week, and only 13% said once per week or less.
- 93% talk to their baby several times a day.
- 53% sing with their child(ren) several times a day and 33% said 4-6 days a week.
- 80% encourage their child(ren) to play with their hands several times a day.
- 73% play with their child(ren) in a way that helps them explore their surroundings several times a day.

Additional quotes from parents demonstrate the impact this program had on families:

- "My son LOVES going into the bookmobile! It's a rewarding experience for him to be able to fill out his reading log & get his little prize & free books. It also encourages us as parents to read with him every single day."
- "At home we implement the same strategy with my children, same as you did. They learn much more rapidly!"

## Success Stories

Library staff reported data, including success stories, on a monthly basis. A few of these success stories demonstrate what an impact this program had on the children and families:

- I overheard a mom tell her son they couldn't go to the bookmobile because they had fines she couldn't pay. I was gently able to stop her and explain that we are more than willing to remove those fines so they could check out books. She was astonished and thrilled. We now see them in the main branch of the library as well as Tuesdays on the bookmobile, getting books and participating in the reading game.
- I had a dad make a point of telling me how much he appreciates our visit. He is a single father working two jobs and the library hours aren't conducive to his work schedule - as a result he hasn't been able to bring his little girl to the library. He gets to pick her up from school during his lunch break and it is the perfect time for them to check out books.
- I've loved seeing families who got cards on the bookmobile become library users since school has ended. The kids are so excited to come to the "big" library and parents have been really impressed with the amount of programs and services we offer.
- One of the little girls who visits the bookmobile was so excited to bring a friend onto the bus this week. She just chatted away, introducing her friend to the staff on the bus and showing her around. *This is our best advertisement, getting kids excited so they get their friends excited!*
- At the beginning of the month we had a family come on the bookmobile and the mother was reminding her daughter that she couldn't check out a puppet because they couldn't find the last one she had brought home. The next week the same little girl came jumping into the bookmobile, holding up the "princess puppet" that she had gone home and searched her room for. She shared with us the stories and adventures the princess had while at her house and shared a story about the new puppet she was choosing. Not only are we advancing early

literacy skills and encouraging talking with the puppets, but we are also teaching basic library skills that are instilling a sense of pride and responsibility in our young patrons.

## Lessons learned

The prototype was very successful but there were challenges and lessons learned throughout the year. This prototype is resource intensive; it requires two staff, gas, bus maintenance, prep time, and restocking time. The bookmobile had multiple maintenance issues which hindered several weekly visits. Parents noticed when the bookmobile was not able to come to the childcare and said that they missed the opportunity to check out books. Parents also needed weekly consistency to remember to return materials.

Many parents visiting the bookmobile were Spanish speakers with limited knowledge of English. The childcare provided a translator, but his/her services were only needed to explain how to get a library card and what the library offers. Typically, other families would jump in to translate if needed; it was a point of pride for parents to speak in English and to be able to help out other families using the library.

The bookmobile was a victim of its own success. Librarians were so busy circulating books during the weekly hour-long visit, that they were often too busy to model early literacy ideas and explain the importance of activities for brain development. The librarians solved this problem by distributing information to parents through fliers, bookmarks, and during Literacy Nights at MECC.

Because of the bookmobile project, library staff is more aware of early literacy needs in their community and the prohibitive struggles some families face (like paying overdue book fines). They are also more willing to consider concepts like "buddy-bags," although they are more challenging to circulate because of the multiple parts in the bag.

The partnership between MRLD and the MECC became more difficult to manage in the summer because temporary teachers rotated almost every week while the main staff was on vacation. Additionally, winter months were hard as there was a steady decline in bookmobile visits as the weather got colder.

## What's next?

The Montrose Regional Library failed a ballot initiative in November 2015 that would have increased funding for the library. Future funding resources are uncertain, and families are constantly asking if the bookmobile will stop coming to school. The library continued bringing the bookmobile to the center through the grant period, but don't know what the future holds at this point. The program was successful, but they are unsure where the board will make cuts or how the program will change after the grant period is over.

