

# SPELL: Supporting Parents in Early Literacy Through Libraries

TIPS AND TOOLS FOR EARLY LITERACY PROGRAMMING TARGETING LOW-INCOME FAMILIES IN YOUR COMMUNITY



COLORADO  
Department of Education  
Colorado State Library



INSTITUTE of  
Museum and Library  
SERVICES



# About this toolkit

This toolkit is designed for public libraries and other organizations interested in working with community partners to plan and offer early literacy programs and services to parents of children birth to three years old.

The first section of this toolkit introduces you to the Colorado State Library's SPELL research projects, which were made possible with generous grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and with support from the Colorado Library Consortium (CLiC), Reach out and Read Colorado, and Serve Colorado. You will learn about the research testing phases of this two-part grant and the SPELL Blueprint, a set of recommendations based on research results. Next, you will be introduced to the eight Colorado libraries that tested the findings of SPELL researchers.

There are separate sections in this toolkit for SPELL blueprint recommendations that were tested by the eight SPELL libraries serving low-income communities ranging from rural to urban. Each section includes a description of the recommendation and SPELL library examples, and a planning worksheet to help you inventory your organization's current programming, environment, strengths, and challenges. You can use these worksheets to design new early literacy programming; strengthen and improve existing activities in your organization; and plan for future efforts.

The eight SPELL libraries partnered with over 25 local community organizations in an attempt to inform and educate parents on early literacy. Many partnerships worked beautifully right from the start, and others took great time and attention to eventually succeed. As with any experiment, there were things that just didn't work. Throughout this toolkit you will encounter **words of wisdom** from the staff at the SPELL libraries you can refer to as you plan your own program. You have the opportunity to learn from SPELL's challenges and triumphs!

**This toolkit is not just for library staff!** While SPELL is a research grant conducted in libraries, the data we gathered and the lessons we learned are relevant to any organization that works with low-income families with children age birth to three. Information about outreach, partnerships, and marketing programming can be useful for any organization developing programming for this target population.

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# Background

## **SPELL: The Research and Blueprint**

In 2012, the Colorado State Library (CSL) received a research grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in order to determine effective methods to promote early learning among low-income children. CSL's review of professional and academic library literature revealed a dearth of research and information available to librarians on how to design and implement early literacy outreach programming for low-income families that might not be using, or even aware of, the resources available in public libraries. To fill this gap, SPELL researchers Dr. Duan Zhang and Dr. Mary Stansbury extended the review of early childhood literature beyond the library field; conducted a wide-reaching environmental scan of educational and health-related programs successful in changing parental behavior; and gathered information directly from low-income parents of children birth to three years old via surveys and focus groups in urban and rural communities.

The product of this research is the SPELL Blueprint - a collection of promising practices for libraries and other agencies to deliver early literacy information and resources to low-income families with young children. This document also suggests library policies, services, community partners, and practices that may make the library more welcoming and accessible to this vulnerable population. To see the most current version of this living document, visit the SPELL website at <http://spellproject.weebly.com>.

## **SPELL II: Putting SPELL into Action**

In 2014, the IMLS awarded CSL a second grant to test the SPELL blueprint recommendations in eight rural and urban libraries throughout Colorado. With training and encouragement by CSL staff to be creative, librarians chose blueprint recommendations they felt best suited their libraries and communities and, after selecting partnering organizations in their area, developed prototype programs to grow and support early literacy activity in low-income families with very young children. Prototypes extended for a year with tracking throughout the process for evaluation by CSL's Library Research Service. Data gathered from pre- and post-surveys, interviews with librarians and program participants, and direct observation of programming have all revealed valuable information and advice for you as you develop your own, research-based program to address early literacy education in your community.

You can learn more about SPELL online at <http://spellproject.weebly.com>

# The Importance of Early Literacy Programming for Low-Income Families

Meet Joan and Emily, both parents of 2-month old baby boys. Joan is in a low-income household and neighborhood, where over 50% of students are eligible for the free- and reduced-cost lunch program. Emily is in a professional, middle-class home and neighborhood. Research shows that both Joan and Emily are likely to be good parents: compassionate, patient, nurturing, conscientious. Research also shows that Emily is much more likely than Joan to talk at length to and with her baby (speaking over 30 million more words to the child by age 3), read to him more frequently and for a longer duration, take him to the library more often, and have more books in the home.

These activities that Emily engages in every day with her son will make a crucial difference in her child arriving in kindergarten ready to read. By age three, children in professional families have a vocabulary of about 1,100 words, while for children from working class families it's only about 750 words, and for children from welfare-recipient families it's just above 500 words. In the case of Joan's son, the lack of skill development may mean he will enter school behind and have a very difficult time making up the gap. In fact, research suggests that there is nearly a 90% chance that a student will remain a poor reader at the end of the fourth grade if the child is a poor reader at the end of the first grade, and that knowledge of the alphabet upon entering kindergarten is a strong predictor of reading ability in tenth grade.

Parents like Joan face a multitude of challenges in sharing books and early literacy activities with their young children, as well as in visiting the library often. For instance, in the first SPELL research project, while all parents save one believe it is very important to read to young children daily, their actual practice clearly decreased with each reduction in both income level and education level, as well as in particularly busy families with more than two children. For barriers to library use, parents cited, in order of frequency, visiting the library when it was open; transportation; fines and fees; and difficulty finding needed resources. Another frequent comment was sheer busy-ness; these parents often simply don't have enough time to visit the library.

Knowledge of the impact poverty often has on reading readiness in young children, coupled with an understanding of the challenges low-income parents can have in using libraries and engaging in early literacy activities, can inspire changes in community services to parents like Joan. Using the resources in this toolkit can help your organization mitigate the impact of poverty on children's preparedness for reading by partnering with a wide variety of organizations, providing services in new ways and places, and changing service model philosophies.

# SPELL Libraries and their Prototypes

The following is a brief summary of the SPELL prototypes of eight Colorado Libraries. For more information on each prototype's population served, inputs, outputs, and resources, please visit the SPELL website <http://spellproject.weebly.com>.

## Cortez Public Library

### CUDDLEUPPETS, BOOKS & COMMUNITY

Cortez librarians took the idea of advertising very seriously by using local newspaper ads, TV channels, radio stations (they even have their own radio storytime show!), and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's TV station, and distributed early literacy programming fliers via their multiple partners to families in their community. Library staff worked with the **Piñon Project**, a nonprofit working with community families, to develop early literacy concepts, models, and strategies in homes of low-income families as well as partnering with them on their family literacy nights. They also developed an active partnership with **Towaoc**, a Head Start program on the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's reservation, and **Butler Head Start**, jointly offering story times, family nights, and an Imagination Library program that provided free books to families on a monthly basis. Cortez also held farmers market storytimes. Finally, they hosted early literacy parent nights at the library using a CuddleUppet (an elephant blanket puppet) as a concrete object to be taken home that reminds parents and children to read together.

## Denver Public Library

### WORKING WITH MIGRANT FAMILIES IN COLORADO

The Denver Public Library early literacy staff partnered with **Denver Metro Migrant Education Program**, which conducts home visits to support migrant families across the Denver metropolitan area. This program sought to find ways to strengthen the family unit to support brain development and teach parents, siblings, and grandparents strategies for early literacy, stressing the importance of play and fun environments. The library worked with their partner's home visitors to organize supports, resources, trainings, and find reasonable, realistic ways to incorporate early literacy activities into their already busy home visit work.

# Garfield County Public Library District

## CREATIVE STORYTIMES

The library staff of one branch worked with multiple partners, including **Raising a Reader** (a non-profit that promotes early literacy), **Aspen Camp** (a year-round camp for the deaf community), **Love and Logic Institute** (a pediatric occupational therapy organization), puppeteers, and other artists. Partners joined monthly for special storytime events at the library. The library staff also created 60 different “Lit Launch” kits in English and Spanish. The library circulates these kits in a book bag; they include books, games, manipulatives, and early literacy recommendations. The literacy recommendations match each “Lit Launch” kit’s theme and are broken down by age group to accommodate the target audience of children birth through three as well as their older siblings.

# High Plains Library District (HPLD)

## FROM HOME TO LIBRARY VISITS

Library staff partnered with **Family Connects**, an organization offering support to low-income families in the community via two home visit programs: Home Instruction for Parents of Preschoolers (HIPPO) and Parents as Teachers (PAT). Participating families were able to attend library orientations that included a tote bag for books, one or more picture books, a library tour, storytime and snacks for the kids. During regular home visits, representatives from Family Connects modeled early literacy strategies and enrolled parents in the library’s 1000 Books before Kindergarten Program. Through the information gained during these home visits, partners were able to bring information about community needs directly to the library, which library staff was able to use to support the whole family through additional programming. This partnership also introduced the connection that led to joint events like library staff speaking about early literacy at HIPPO and PAT family graduations; the library bringing the bookmobile to parent events; and HIPPO staff assisting in translating library signage.

# Lake County Public Library

## BRAIN TIME & STORYTIME

The library staff partnered with **Lake County School District**. Before the SPELL program, the preschool's funding was decreased so they could no longer afford buses to get students to the library. Some teachers found the previous program so valuable that they walked the 1.5 miles to attend! The SPELL project allowed the library to fund a bus so kids could continue to make the journey to the public library. The local preschool and elementary school brought their students to the library once a week for storytime and a related craft. In addition, the library offered Brain Time, an early literacy curriculum designed for parents of babies aged 6-18 months that focuses on brain development and early literacy. The library offered the program as a series of three weekly 30-minute sessions, and parents who attended all of the sessions chose a book to take home along with early literacy tip fliers. In addition, library staff reached out to the Hispanic community and increased early literacy awareness in its community by presenting to a local high school's support group for pregnant teens and mothers.

# Montrose Regional Library District

## DRIVING THE LIBRARY TO FAMILIES

Library staff partnered with **Montrose Early Childhood Center** to bring its bookmobile to the center during child pickup and drop-off times once a week. In addition to checking out books, bookmobile staff waived previous and new fines and offered library card signup. They served Spanish-speakers with the help of translators from the childcare, developed relationships with parents and children, and doubled the books in many children's homes. Themed Buddy Bags were created for check out, which included books, manipulatives, and a flier with early literacy activities and information. In addition, staff created a bookmobile flier with early literacy tips for parents and a game board for kids to track how many books they read. After they finished the game, children could choose prizes from a Treasure Chest and take home a free book! During bookmobile visits, library staff talked with parents/caregivers and children about the importance of reading and explained the reading game - emphasizing that reading is FUN. Staff also spoke with parents and childcare teachers about early literacy skills and introduced them to various library services. The partner actively promoted the bookmobile to parents, resulting in many new patrons. In addition, the library offered two Literacy Nights for families after school.

## Pikes Peak Library District

### STORYTIME KITS FOR CHILDCARE CENTERS & PLAY GROUPS

The library staff used a two-prong approach to reach parents by connecting with them at childcare centers and playgroups. Partnering with **Princeton Academy**, librarians visited the childcare center twice a month to provide storytime and model early literacy activities using large kits. These kits were left with the teachers for continued use throughout the month. Three parent events occurred during child pickup times, and the childcare teachers attended three early literacy trainings run by library staff. The library staff reached parents by attending community playgroups, where they modeled early literacy strategies while talking with parents about early literacy and the library.

## Pueblo City-County Library District

### KITS TO CHILDCARE CENTERS

The library staff focused on children who could be reached through four local childcare centers: **Thatcher Learning Center**, **Trinity Lutheran Early Learning Center**, **Kinderkirk Preschool**, and **Benjamin Franklin Elementary School**. A librarian visited a childcare center weekly, rotating through the four centers monthly. She modeled storytime, introduced literacy kits, and interacted with teachers and children. Kits were left in the classrooms for the month. She returned to the center during child pick-up times to read books and to set up hands-on early literacy activities for kids while they waited for their parent. She used this opportunity to touch base with parents, explain the library and its partnership with the childcare center, and provide early literacy tips.

# What Does This Mean for Your Organization?

SPELL library staff and their partners used the SPELL blueprint to design their early literacy outreach programs. In this section of the toolkit, learn what they discovered as they implemented their programs, and use this to design or improve your own services. For the most recent version of the SPELL blueprint, visit <http://spellproject.weebly.com>.

## In Your Building: Staff training

### SPELL BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Train all staff in cultural competency and ensure they are aware of the cultures represented in your community. Ensure parents know that they and their children are welcome in the library. Empower all staff to know that they can make a difference in educating parents of young children about early literacy. Introduce staff to the SPELL blueprint.

*"(Our partners) helped fill a cultural knowledge gap that existed within our organization about the patrons in our service area. They helped us to better understand the diversity of families that reside in Weld County."*

*Becki Loughlin, High Plains Library District*

### EARLY LITERACY TRAINING

All of your outreach efforts will inevitably bring new users to your organization. It's important to ensure they are met by staff members who understand and welcome them and can help them as they seek to incorporate early literacy activities in their young children's lives. As the early literacy expert in your organization, you can offer training to staff members about early literacy. Knowing that children learn by speaking, listening, singing, and playing with their parents and caregivers will help all staff members understand that children should not be "shushed" in your building.

## MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS

Educating all staff about the different cultures represented in your community can also help foster a warm, welcoming environment for all who enter your doors. Your community partners can be valuable resources and can bring a first-hand perspective in training your staff.

### SPELL Library examples

#### Denver Public Library

Partner's director trained library staff about the migrant population in the Metro Denver and about services available to them in the community.

#### High Plains Library District

Library staff learned from partner how to better serve the multicultural target population.

# Worksheet for Planning for Staff Training

Does your organization have continuing education or training times for staff?

How can you schedule time to talk to your colleagues about early literacy?

Observe your colleagues in their interactions with customers. Do the customers seem welcome and understood or do you need more training to make this the norm?

What population in your community are you trying to reach?

How can you improve your understanding of the different cultures in your community?  
What can you do to help your colleagues do the same?

List community resources and organizations you might recruit to visit your library organization and educate the staff about different groups in your service area.

## In Your Building: Space

### SPELL BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Display, organize and/or label books based on age level; get the message out that very young children are welcome in your library (or building); their presence is not bothersome, even when they may be loud or on the move.

*"One library had multiple places with toys on the floor and kids played loudly with the librarian's approval. She even stopped by to play with them!"*

*Courtney Vidacovich Donovan, SPELL Research Analyst*

### CREATING A SPACE FOR BIRTH TO THREE YEAR OLDS

SPELL survey and focus group results indicated many parents of young children worry that their children might not be welcome in the library because they are noisy and physically active. They also reported difficulty finding engaging books in collections shelved by author, rather than by subject or age group. You can create displays and model and encourage active, exuberant enjoyment of the collections so that the space welcomes young children. Almost all libraries have age-appropriate books, but some are more successful than others in offering a warm, welcoming experience for families with young children. While none of the SPELL libraries incorporated space alterations as part of their prototype, the following worksheet is based on observations by a SPELL research analyst and feedback from parents in the original SPELL grant research.

# Worksheet for Planning Your Space

Take some time to look at your building, your children's section, and your collection with the eyes of a parent of a young child. Consider visiting libraries in your area to compare and contrast them and gather ideas to make your space more welcoming.

Are directions to the children's area clear in your space? Children love to follow arrows or footsteps and notice changes in flooring.

Do signs encourage cautious or active use of the collections? (DO NOT RESHELVE BOOKS vs. WE WILL RESHELVE YOUR BOOKS! PLEASE PUT BOOKS ON THIS CART AFTER YOU ENJOY THEM)

How is your collection shelved? Are books low to the ground and easy for your smallest patrons to access?

Do you shelve by author last name or by subject? Consider visiting a library that shelves by subject and observe how children engage with the books.

Are manipulatives, toys, puzzles, and kits easily accessed? Are they near books vs. in a different section?

Is there comfortable seating that fosters parent/child interaction?

Do you have signs asking for quiet? What does that message send to customers?

# In Your Building: Collection

## SPELL BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Have a rich collection of board books in languages common in your community. Offer collections of books for parents on parenting and early literacy. Offer book bags and kits available for checkout. Make sure your collection includes languages spoken in your community and that are culturally appropriate.

*“A family with young children visited the library to check out texture board books. After fulfilling this request, library staff showed them the Launch Kits and explained the materials inside them, the purpose of the SPELL Grant, and the program developed to help encourage early literacy for families. The mother mentioned wanting to learn Spanish vocabulary words with her children, and was so excited to find that there was a bilingual kit about colors.”*

*Marie Proctor, Garfield County Public Library District*

## EARLY LITERACY KITS, BOOKS, AND MEDIA COLLECTION

Literacy kits are a powerful way to provide parents with early literacy information, fun activities, and materials at home in a convenient, age-appropriate package. They are also a quick and convenient way to bring early literacy storytimes to partner organizations. SPELL library staff have shared detailed information about their early literacy kits, and you can find them on the SPELL website <http://spellproject.weebly.com>; these libraries offer themed, age-appropriate kits that include books, music, manipulatives, early literacy tips, activity suggestions, and more.

A varied collection of board books, wordless books, picture books, and parenting books in languages spoken by members of your community enrich the experience of your target population, along with age-appropriate music, interactive e-books, and DVDs. Libraries have access to information on material in multiple languages, and your organization can reach out to your library for assistance building a collection in your offices where you serve families.

## SPELL library examples

### Pikes Peak Library District and Pueblo Public Library

Circulated kits at childcare centers. This gave the library staff the opportunity to use them during storytime, model early literacy activities for childcare workers and parents, and demonstrate the materials available to parents should they choose to visit the library.

### Montrose Regional Library District

Created "Buddy Bags" for check out from the bookmobile that contained manipulatives, books, and early literacy information for parents.

### Garfield County Public Library District

Created 60 kits with unique themes that included books, manipulatives, and games, with early literacy strategies broken down according to age group. These "Lit Launch" kits are stored in special bags made out of recycled milk jugs to make them very durable. The kits are in English and Spanish.

### Lake County Public Library

Expanded their children's materials to include material in Spanish.

# Worksheet for Evaluating Your Collection

Take some time to think about your current collection of materials for families with children birth through three.

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Is your collection fresh and inviting or in need of some new material? Are toys clean and attractive? Are books in good condition?

Do you have books in languages spoken by your customers? Do your manipulatives reflect your community (toys, dolls, cultural characters)?

Do you have wordless picture books?

Will you provide literacy kits?

What will be the purpose of your kits?  
(Events? Parent checkout? School or childcare checkout? Partner checkout?)

How many different kits do you want or need? (Consider your storage space!)

What will you store them in? Plastic bins? Large boxes? Book bags?

What will the check-out/check-in process be like? Consider staff time for review of contents and replacement of lost items.

Will they be themed?

Will you have multiple languages available?

How much money are you willing to spend?

How much time are you able to spend?

(All of the SPELL library staff were surprised at the amount of time it took to put together themed kits, including shopping lists, purchase orders, and the actual assembly of each kit. Worth the effort, but plan accordingly!)

# In Your Library: Policies

## SPELL BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Work with your director and governing board to eliminate overdue fines and fees for lost or damaged board and picture books. Fines and fees are barriers to low-income families and parents who fear financial penalties for using the library.

*"Patrons can struggle to have consistent access to the library, so getting materials returned on time can be a real challenge and we want to make using the library as easy as possible for these patrons . . . many of our target families are low-income and having library fines could prevent continued use of the Bookmobile if they weren't able to pay them off."*

*Lizz Martensen, Montrose Regional Library District*

## ELIMINATING FINES

SPELL research revealed that library fines and fees for overdue, damaged, and lost materials are barriers that prevent low-income parents and caregivers of young children from using public libraries. After reviewing the academic and professional literature regarding library fines and fees, including qualitative research, quantitative studies, and editorial pieces, as well as using finding from the two studies with parents and public libraries in Colorado, CSL recommends public libraries eliminate fines and fees on children's materials. The scant research on the value and impact of library fines and fees does not indicate a clear benefit of administering these policies, and they may be costly to enforce. Library governing authorities that develop policies to remove fines and fees on juvenile material find it effective in building a positive relationship with families with young children.

## SPELL Library examples

### Pikes Peak Library District and Denver Public Library

Had already implemented change and do not charge for overdue children's items.

### High Plains Library District

Eliminated fines on all late returns of materials (excluding DVDs). Six months after late fees were eliminated, overall circulation was up, and 95% of their materials were returned within a week of the due date. Library staff are pleased with the policy change, as they have far fewer unpleasant interactions with patrons about late fees, and have more time to see to their other duties. The financial effect on the institution has been labeled "neutral" because, while there is less money collected, the credit card readers at the self-check stations were eliminated along with the expenses associated with them

### Garfield County Public Library District

Libraries no longer charge late fees on picture books, waive fees for damages to board books, and have become more flexible on damages of picture books in the interest of encouraging families to make full use of the materials.

### Montrose Regional Library District

Did not charge late fees for materials checked out from the bookmobile and also waived existing fines and fees for bookmobile users.

# Worksheet for Planning Policy Changes

What are your current policies regarding late returns, damaged or lost children's materials?

Who is responsible for changing library policies? Who would be open to a conversation about changing your policy?

Who can help you with your message? (Supervisor, colleagues, administrators, early childhood experts, sympathetic board members, patrons, partners)

What would be your first steps in seeking a change in this policy?

# In Your Community: Partnerships

## SPELL BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Actively partner with other organizations serving parents with young children in your community. Together, you can cross-promote services and programs; train others on delivering the early literacy message; reach more parents; maximize valuable time and resources; and sustain services more easily.

*"Organizations already working with the families are a trusted network. If we can partner with them, they will help us gain access to the families. Working through already trusted networks is a proven way to reach families not already coming to the library."*

*Mary Kuehner, Denver Public Library*

## NO PARTNERSHIP IS LIKE ANY OTHER

Your organization, your program, your community, your schedule, your partner's strengths and challenges, and a host of other factors will affect how you work with a partner organization in delivering early literacy information to families. Partnerships between SPELL libraries and community organizations took many forms.

**Please note:** *one type is not better than the other! They're just different and unique to your relationship with your partner.*

## LIBRARY-INTENSIVE PARTNERSHIP

The library does the majority of the planning and work for the program. The partner is engaged and open to the new ideas, activities, teaching, and learning in this type of partnership, but is often unable to actively engage in planning and activities. The organization participates in this partnership by directly serving the library's target community so the library can work through the organization, often on the partner organization's physical premises, to meet the needs of children, parents, and the community. Getting community members to the physical library itself may be an expectation throughout the course of this partnership, but may need to be a goal for a longer term.

## SPELL Library examples

### Cortez Public Library + Piñon Project, Butler Head Start, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

- Library staff presented at festivals and events for parents and children at partners' sites
- Library staff hosted early literacy nights

### Montrose Regional Library District + Montrose Early Childhood Center

- Library staff brought bookmobile to childcare center during drop-off and pick-up
- Library eliminated fines, encouraged check-outs, supported parents in early literacy

### Pikes Peak Library District + Princeton Academy (preschool/childcare center)

- Partner connected library to playgroups
- Library staff hosted storytimes for playgroups
- Library staff educated parents about supporting early literacy

### Pueblo City-County Library District + Thatcher Learning Center, Trinity Lutheran Early Learning Center, Kinderkirk Preschool, and Benjamin Franklin Elementary School

- Library staff presented storytimes at childcare centers
- Library staff attended and presented at parent night at centers
- Library staff trained childcare workers on supporting early literacy

### Lake County Public Library

- Library provided transportation funding for teachers and students to visit library
- Library staff provided parenting programming
- Library staff visited local high school to education pregnant and parenting teens.

## PARTNER-INTENSIVE PARTNERSHIP

The partner is most actively engaged in providing early literacy information and training to families while the library is a resource and support for the ideas, activities, and instruction. If the partner organization did not do all – or most – of the work there would be no partnership. For the SPELL project, these partnerships were typically seen when libraries worked with unique organizations that exist to target a specific need, or serve a population that is not easily reachable. The library supports the partner with the hope of connecting low-income families in the target communities to the library.

### SPELL Library example

Denver Public Library + Metro Migrant Education Program

- Library staff provided information and resources to partner
- Partner incorporated early literacy support into home visits

## PASSIVE PARTNERSHIP

Once a partnership is established, no additional work or activity is required for either organization. Essentially both organizations are now overtly aware of the other and can provide resource support for families and community as situations arise. This type of partnership is more focused on understanding what the other does and knowing how to support them, such as through advertising and referrals for families. Both the library and the partner organization are already directly serving the community and can now act as a passive support for each other without specific collaborative projects.

### SPELL Library examples

Cortez Public Library + local medical offices

- Library staff visited offices and supplemented early literacy information (bulletin boards, fliers)
- Library staff informed partner about resources available at library
- Partner provided information to families during office visits

Most SPELL libraries + Early Childhood Councils (county-level organizations enacted by Colorado state statute to support local early childhood services)

- Partners become aware of early literacy resources available at the library
- Library staff becomes aware of early childhood events and resources available in the community
- Partners connect library staff to early childhood organization and informal groups

## 50-50 PARTNERSHIP

In this relationship, both organizations take roughly equal responsibility for the planning and implementation. Communication flows freely, and both organizations directly serve the targeted community. Brainstorming ideas to address community needs is a priority and surpasses what both organizations could do individually. The library's resources are channeled through the partner directly to the community, while the partner listens to the community's needs and channels these back to the library. In the beginning the partner can hold a mediator role between the library and community, but this changes over the course of the partnership.

## SPELL Library examples

### High Plains Library District + Family Connects HIPPO and Parents as Teachers

- Library staff trained partner on supporting early literacy in families.
- Partner trained library staff on working with English language learners
- Partner scheduled clients' orientations at library
- Library staff oriented clients to library with tour, books to take home, library cards
- Partners modeled early literacy in home visits, signed families up for library programming
- Library staff brought outreach service to partner events (graduations, parent events)
- Partner helped translate library signage to languages spoken by clients

### Garfield County Public Library District + Raising a Reader Aspen to Parachute

- Partners visited library for performances and programs encouraging reading (puppeteers, storytellers, child development specialists, etc.)
- Library staff scheduled, promoted, provided space, and participated in these special events

## WORDS OF WISDOM FROM SPELL LIBRARIES ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

### Partner with an established, stable organization.

Look for organizations that are already passionate about their work with young children and the community.

### Find the right people in the organization.

- Find partners who are excited to work with you.
- Partners should be dedicated, and more importantly, interested in this project because their assistance will require extra effort on their part.

### Connect with your local or regional early childhood council or similar government organization to find partners.

- These organizations are already working with low-income families with children age birth to three.
- Network with organizations already working with families who have young children.

### Think outside the box!

### Reach out and ask organizations for help.

- Look for alignment of goals.
- Resources both organizations have may be mutually valuable.

### Be flexible and open to change.

### Clearly communicate your interest in partnering.

- A lot of organizations are interested in working with libraries but don't know how to initiate a partnership. Clearly present this information on a website, and when someone calls, identify one staff member who acts as a contact person for potential partnerships.
- Streamline this process to encourage partners to reach out to you.

### Know your partner's fiscal responsibilities and restraints.

- If the partner is primarily or solely grant funded, be aware of what activities and staff are funded and for how long the organization will have this financial support.

### Over-communicate expectations.

- Create consequences for not meeting expectations.
- Written agreements such as MOUs are a great first step, but without dedication and follow through these become meaningless.
- Be aware of every participating partner's timelines and busy seasons to coordinate the best times to work together.

### Create specific goals and start small.

- Expansion is easier than realizing that either partner overcommitted and can no longer accomplish initial goals.
- Keep the long-term goals in mind right at the beginning.

### Consider different types of partnerships.

- Be intentional and don't try to force a 50-50 partnership if a library-intensive or other type of partnership may be the better option.
- Both organizations should benefit in some way; if a partnership is completely one-sided, sustainability is not feasible.

# Worksheet for Planning and Developing Partnerships

Write down any **current partners** relevant to early literacy programming and outreach to low-income families in your community.

Are there organizations in the community that may connect you to potential partners?

List **potential partners in the community** and the goals your organization might share with them.

How will the partnership be mutually beneficial?

How will the partnership benefit your community?

What challenges do you think you might face in this partnership? How will you address them?

What do you expect to result from this partnership? What will your partners expect?

How will you know if this partnership is working? How will you assess its effectiveness during and after you program is implemented?

# In Your Community: Outreach

## SPELL BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Present programs in convenient locations and in conjunction with existing programs that serve low-income families. Ensure immigrant and migrant families know the services the library offers, including specific resources in their language, and that they and their young children are welcome in your library.

*"When I got out of my car they started jumping up and down and saying,  
'the library lady is here!'"*

*Kirsten Dees, Pueblo City-County Library District*

## CHILDCARE CENTERS

*"The partnership with Parenting Matters and the facilitation of the playgroups has put us into a community of caregivers and parents that we likely would not reach through regular library programming and/or our contacts with local childcare centers."*

*Evan Kendrick, Pikes Peak Library District*

Childcare centers and early childhood programs allow library staff to interact with children, parents, and caregivers in a place and time convenient to the families. Bringing early literacy information and resources into the community is an effective way to introduce non-users to the library.

## SPELL Library examples

### Pueblo City-County Library District

A librarian conducted storytimes, circulated literacy kits, trained childcare staff, presented at parent nights in childcare settings.

### Pikes Peak Library District

A librarian visited childcare centers to offer storytimes and circulate literacy kits.

### Montrose Regional Library District

Its bookmobile visited a childcare center during child pick-up and drop-off times when parents were available.

## WORDS OF WISDOM FROM SPELL LIBRARIES ABOUT OUTREACH

### Invest time.

- Partnerships with childcare organizations are typically library staff intensive and require dedicated time and travel from the visiting library staff.

### Contact Early Childhood Councils (in Colorado) or other early childhood networking organizations.

- These early childhood organizations are great resources for finding and connecting with childcare centers that are willing to partner.

### Build relationships.

- Take time to get to know teachers and staff at childcare centers, and let them get to know you. It is vital to build this trust so the teachers will be more receptive to the early literacy strategies being modeled.
- Get to know the children, too! You have an immediate connection to a parent when you can talk familiarly about their child.

### Model early literacy strategies.

- Modeling will ensure that caregivers continue to use best practices when you're gone.
- Many childcare teachers do not receive intensive early literacy training, and they can learn how to interact effectively by watching you.
- When modeling, clearly explain what is happening and why it is important, i.e. "we are dancing around to music because we are learning..."

### Co-create a routine and establish expectations.

- Be reliable and communicate your schedule.
- Caregivers should know when the librarian will arrive, and they should be actively encouraged to participate.
- Routines help children be prepared for storytime. Visits can be monthly, bi-monthly, or weekly; just be consistent!

### Leave pre-made literacy kits.

- Kits support staff of childcare centers in low-income areas that may not have resources or specific knowledge of early literacy.
- These become a lesson plan in a box for caregivers who lack training, time and resources.

### Connect with parents whenever possible.

- Have fliers ready to help explain literacy tips and library resources.
- If possible, hold a parent night with dinner provided for families. This gives parents time to relax and provides an opportunity for you to connect with them and model early literacy strategies.

### Use children's backpacks to send home information.

- A good way to connect and remind parents of events is to send fliers home with children.

### Train caregivers.

- Model activities, include brain-based research tips, and allow time for caregivers to explore the ideas. The Every Child Ready to Read information is a good model for training sessions.

### Lessons Learned

Not every childcare center is suitable for a partnership for early literacy programming. Budget constraints, slim staffing, space concerns, and an inability to expand services are all circumstances that can inhibit the development of a meaningful, effective partnership.

Timing and scheduling will be a big challenge in this partnership. It is important to communicate with childcare partners to find the best time to visit the center, the best times and ways to connect with parents, and to schedule teacher trainings that everyone can attend. Be specific with trainings for childcare providers and mindful of their schedules. As a librarian from the Pikes Peak Library District mentioned, "it is difficult to stress the importance of intentional planning for lessons in the classrooms when the teachers don't have much planning time to speak of. It seems like the childcare workers are as frazzled as the parents at times. What a difficult job it must be to work in such a loud environment, with children who have so many needs and deficiencies at home."

## MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

Reaching marginalized populations such as immigrants and migrant families can be challenging. Whether they are unfamiliar with the United States' public library systems, mistrust governmental organizations, move frequently, or face language barriers, these families can be hard to locate and serve. The SPELL grant allowed Colorado libraries to experiment with leveraging partners' access to hard-to-reach families in their homes and schools.

### SPELL Library examples

#### Denver Public Library

Trained partner's home visitor to incorporate early literacy activities in her home visits.

#### High Plains Library District

Worked with partner's home visitors to build trust, educate families about the library and, eventually, arrange visits to the library.

#### Montrose Regional Library District

Arranged to have a Spanish-speaking teacher on their bookmobile during visits to help welcome and educate visitors.

## WORDS OF WISDOM FROM SPELL LIBRARIES ABOUT SERVING MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

Library partnerships involving migrant/immigrant communities are likely to be **Partner Intensive** and will require the library to provide resources and supports to their partner organization.

### Work through already trusted networks.

This is a proven way to reach families not already coming to the library. Organizations that families know and trust - a church group, refugee support organization, or a revered community leader who endorses the library - help lend legitimacy to your message.

### Be aware of language barriers.

While many libraries have bilingual employees, immigrant, refugee, and migrant communities may include scores of languages spoken at home. When working with families facing these hurdles, tailor programming to their strengths; focus on song, arts & crafts, wordless books, and storytelling/spoken word interactions between caregivers and children.

### Being patient builds trust!

## COMMUNITY EVENTS

An organization's visible presence at community events and meetings attended by low-income families of young children is an effective way to provide early literacy training and activities and introduce non-users to the library.

### SPELL Library examples

#### Cortez Public Library

Conducted storytimes at farmers' markets

#### Denver Public Library

Brought early literacy activities to partner's Summer Fun in the Park event

#### Lake County Public Library

Visited a local high school and presented to pregnant and parenting teens

#### High Plains Library District

Attended partner's carnival with their bookmobile and were present at graduations from partner programming

# In Your Community: Marketing

## SPELL BLUEPRINT RECOMMENDATIONS

Actively promote your early literacy programs and services, as well as early literacy awareness in general, widely in your community. Leverage the online environment for promotion and service delivery

*"Early childhood literacy is a critical part of a child's development that can have important impacts as they start school and beyond. KSJD's Tom Yoder talks with Cortez Public Library Director Eric Ikenouye and Children's Librarian Laura McHenry about how the library is working with local organizations and parents to make sure young children are exposed to books, reading, and vocabulary that will give them a solid foundation for learning as they grow."*

*Tom Yoder, KSJD Dryland Community Radio*

*(listen to the interview here: <http://ksjd.org/post/early-childhood-literacy#stream/0>)*

### Your community is interested in your work, and it will help spread the word about your programs.

Reaching widely into your community means using every method available. Reaching out to businesses, media outlets, governmental organizations and asking them for space on their websites, billboards, social media platforms and television/radio shows is a simple way to garner free publicity for your programming and your early literacy message.

### SPELL Library example

#### Cortez Public Library

Contacted local television and radio stations and distributed fliers widely throughout their community. Their director and children's librarian were interviewed on a local radio program, providing them with 15 minutes of airtime to educate listeners about early literacy and library services. Over time, they were provided airtime for their own radio storytime.

### Partner organizations are great marketers.

The beauty of partnering with a community organization is that your message reaches far beyond your reach!

## SPELL Library examples

### Garfield County Public Libraries

Their Early Head Start contact promoted SPELL by bringing early literacy information and early literacy kits to the early learning center's community resource fair

### Montrose Regional Library District

Participated in a roundtable discussion that brought library staff together with childcare center teachers, staff, and administrators. They hatched plans to promote their bookmobile to parents and explain how easy it is to get a library card, have fines waived, and check out books.

### High Plains Library District

Their partner promoted internet access, GED preparation courses, and computer classes during their home visits. Library staff were pleased to welcome these new adult users to the library.

## Leverage the online environment, and make sure your website spreads the early literacy message.

Think creatively about ways to reach low-income families with young children. The 2012 SPELL research revealed **80% of parents and caregivers** prefer to access library program information online. More and more, people access the internet using their mobile phones. If most parents and caregivers of young children look for information about your library services through the library website, what will they find on your site about early literacy?

## SPELL Library examples

### Denver Public Library

Has a comprehensive section on children's services with specific information for parents of babies, toddlers and preschoolers

### All SPELL libraries' websites

Contain information about children's services, and many include early literacy messaging.

## WORDS OF WISDOM FROM SPELL LIBRARIES ABOUT MARKETING

The eight SPELL libraries were encouraged to meet parents where they are and market early literacy offerings. They experimented with many methods. The following are their suggestions to you as you plan your marketing and outreach.

- Research the community to find venues to get free advertising.
- Use the same flier or content for every outlet to ensure that all information is consistent.
- Distribute fliers, pamphlets, and/or bookmarks with early literacy tips and strategies.
- Use word of mouth - one site's local survey revealed that this was the most effective way to draw in new parents.
- Set up an interview with the local newspaper, and radio and television stations.
- Write an article for the local newspaper.
- Post fliers on public bulletin boards in grocery stores, community centers, etc.; be creative!
- Find out if medical offices have bulletin board for fliers for new parents
- Check in with school districts (bulletin boards, fliers for student book bags, classroom signs, communications with and through teachers, school newsletters, back-to-school events)
- Consider email blasts
- Ask for space on lighted town marquee signs
- Don't forget your organization's website
- Communicate via Facebook, Twitter and other online platforms
- Distribute information at community resource fairs, farmers markets, community play groups

### Lessons Learned

Carefully investigate third-party online early literacy offerings before committing funds to these services. If the registration process for parents is cumbersome, or the contract is expensive, there might be a better use for your funds. There are many online resources for families that don't require funding, and it could be better to start with them. See Appendix for additional resources..

# Worksheet For Planning Outreach

It's time to do some research! Spend some time finding out the following information about your community

Research your community's demographics; start with the following questions (see the Library Research Service's Community Analysis Scan, [https://www.lrs.org/public/ca\\_form.php](https://www.lrs.org/public/ca_form.php), for more demographic questions and resources):

- What is the population of your community?
- What is the projected population in 5 years?
- What percentage of the people in your community is under 5 years old?
- How many people are there in single-family households?
- How many people speak a language other than English in your community? What are the top 5 foreign languages spoken?
- What is the percentage of unemployed people in your community?
- What percent of the families in your community are below the poverty line?

Is there a city or county early childhood organization in your community?

List the following in your service area:

- Childcare centers, preschools, and elementary schools.
- Community centers
- Cultural centers
- Community leaders, informal and formal (governmental, faith-based, cultural)

- Social services agencies serving low-income families

Brainstorm with colleagues to discuss the best way to reach non-users in your community.

What resources does your organization have to conduct outreach?

Do you have frequent visitors who might be good at connecting you with members of their community?

How does your organization currently promote early literacy?

- In your organization
- On the website
- In the community

Is your administration supportive of outreach activities?

What outreach services does your organization provide now? What are your organization's strengths when considering outreach?

Do you have a bookmobile or other service vehicle? Where does it go? Can that service area expand or change?

What are potential community organizations that can help you spread the word about early literacy to low-income families of young children?

Who in your organization has good contacts with local media? If no one, what is your plan to reach out for airtime/print? What would your message be?

Are there community events in which your organization does or can participate?

What challenges do you anticipate when you think about extending services outside of your organization's walls?

# Planning for the Future

The SPELL project allowed eight Colorado libraries to be creative and test different methods of reaching out to their target populations. Library staff took steps to plan for the sustainability of their programs, and they remained flexible during the implementation of their prototypes, changing course when necessary. As with any experiment, there were successes and there were methods that weren't as effective. Some programs will continue past the conclusion of the research project, and others will cease for lack of funding. Librarians will continue to support the circulation of literacy kits, to market their services widely, and to reach out to low-income families. The knowledge gained about the members of each community will inform future outreach programming. The partnerships developed during the research grant have strengthened the bond between libraries and their communities, and the target populations will benefit from these relationships.

When asked how the SPELL programming made a difference in their lives, parents indicated they knew more everyday activities to do with children to help them be ready to read in kindergarten; they had a regular routine for reading books with their children; they encouraged their children to play with their hands; and they played with their children in a way that helped them explore their surroundings. As you find community partners and begin to develop your own early literacy outreach program, let the words of the parents who benefited from SPELL programming inspire you!

*"My son LOVES going into the bookmobile! It also encourages us as parents to read with him every single day."*

*"Exposure to books in different environments has helped . . . they are not just for bedtime."*

*"The reassurance that little things, most of which I've already been doing, are helping my kids learn is nice. Being a parent can be scary and intimidating. I like programs like this that reassure, encourage and educate."*

# Worksheet for Planning Your Ideal Program

Now that you have learned from the SPELL libraries and taken time to fill out the worksheets in each section, gather all of the SPELL worksheets in this toolkit and settle in for some brainstorming and planning.

Examine the SPELL Blueprint and answer the following questions:

What is your **dream outcome** of your early literacy programming?

Which Blueprint recommendations are already in place in your organization?

Which recommendations do you want to implement?

Are there components of the SPELL libraries' prototypes that you think will work well in your organization? Does your organization serve a similar community to one of the libraries?

Who will you work with **within your organization** to implement SPELL recommendations?

List potential community partners:

What is your target audience?

Who can help you get to know your target audience better?  
(In your organization and in the community)

What is your timeline? Is there a better time to begin this program? What events do you see in your library's future that might conflict with this program (for example, summer reading)?

What resources do you foresee being necessary as you build your program?  
(space, staff time, materials, travel, etc.)

Create a brief budget overview for your project.

How will you promote your program? Who can help you with this?

How do you plan to sustain this program?

How will you evaluate this program?

What change do you expect as a result of this program?

What are the first steps you will take in planning your program?

# Appendix: Additional Resources

## For Parents and Caregivers

### BRIGHT BY THREE

<http://brightbythree.org/>

Bright by Three is a nonprofit that provides home visiting services to parents with young children in Colorado, as well as a free text messaging service with weekly parenting tips based upon their child's age.

### CLEL BELL AWARDS

<http://www.clel.org/#!clelbellaawards/c8k2>

The CLEL Bell Awards annually recognize five high-quality picture books published the prior year that provide excellent support of early literacy development in young children.

### DAILY VROOM

<http://www.joinvroom.org/>

Daily Vroom provides parents of children birth through five with a free app and online resources to help build young brains in simple, fun ways.

### EARLIER IS EASIER

<http://www.earlieriseasier.org/>

Earlier is Easier is a public awareness campaign in the Denver Metro area that raises awareness of the importance of engaging children birth through three in simple early literacy activities. Its website shares many fun, easy activities that parents can do with their young children.

## **PBS PARENTS**

<http://www.pbs.org/parents>

Information for parents is broken down into developmentally appropriate practice for Babies and Toddlers, Preschool & Kindergarten, Grade School and Preteen and Teen. This is a useful source of information for families, particularly those with more than one child. Accessible and engaging, it is vetted by a panel of experts.

## **STORYBLOCKS**

<http://www.storyblocks.org/>

StoryBlocks, a project of CLEL (Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy), is a collection of 30-60 second videos that model to parents, caregivers, and library staff songs and rhymes appropriate for early childhood; each video includes helpful early literacy tips to increase caregivers' understanding of child development and pre-literacy needs. Videos are available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, Amharic, and French.

## **For Library and Early Childhood Organization Staff**

### **SPELL WEBSITE**

<http://spellproject.weebly.com>

Find all of the results of the SPELL project online.

### **CLEL (COLORADO LIBRARIES FOR EARLY LITERACY)**

<http://www.clel.org/>

CLEL is a group of library staff dedicated to providing high quality services to young children and their families; membership is free and open to staff outside of Colorado. CLEL projects include StoryBlocks, CLEL Bell Awards, an annual conference, online resources, and Storytime Skill Builders, a series of 10 videos designed to train library staff and early childhood educators in a variety of storytime skills.

## COLORÍN COLORADO

<http://www.colorincolorado.org>

This bilingual site for educators and families of English language learners is a source of rich resources for those working with bilingual families. Particularly useful is the section on “Tips for Families.”

## EVERY CHILD READY TO READ®

<http://www.everychildreadytoread.org/>

Every Child Ready to Read® is a parent education initiative from the Public Library Association that stresses that early literacy begins with the primary adults in a child's life. It offers resources for staff that provide storytimes to incorporate early literacy tips and simple activities that parents can do with their children around reading, talking, playing, singing and writing.

## ALA WHITE PAPER

### The Importance of Diversity in Library Programs and Material Collections for Children

[http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/ALSCwhitepaper\\_importance%20of%20diversity\\_with%20graphics\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/ALSCwhitepaper_importance%20of%20diversity_with%20graphics_FINAL.pdf)

This white paper, written for the Association for Library Service to Children by Dr. Jamie Campbell Naidoo in 2014, emphasizes the importance of developing print and digital collections that reflect cultural diversity, and details how librarians can promote cultural understanding through programs that embody the diversity of their communities and the larger world.

## CSL WHITE PAPER

### Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials

<http://spellproject.weebly.com>

This white paper, produced by the Colorado State Library, advocates for the removal of fines and fees on early literacy materials.

## RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

<https://www.lrs.org/data-tools/public-libraries/resources-for-community-analysis/>

Colorado State Library's Library Research Service provides many resources to find and analyze community demographics.

## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION EARLY LEARNING

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/index.html>

The source of government information and opportunities, with several useful sections for organizations that serve childcare organizations. Find here grant opportunities, policy updates and reports from related organizations.