LEADING ON LITERACY

Seven libraries, seven approaches to multiple literacies

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Inspired by the Library Journal/School Library Journal Public Library Think Tank and brought to you by OverDrive

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Kindergarten Readiness on the Road

In 2015–16, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL) surveyed the community to determine critical issues and service priorities. Top of the list was ensuring that children enter school ready to begin formal learning; local studies found that the 55 percent of children in Topeka & Shawnee County who enter kindergarten with no preschool experience struggle with vocabulary, sharing, and taking turns. “When we asked several elementary school principals what they see on the first day of school…they describe the large disparity among [new kindergartners],” says Marie Pyko, director of public services at TSCPL. “One of the principals said, ‘Can you imagine where we could go if all children had an early learning experience and started in a similar place for kindergarten?’”

**SHARED GOAL**

In response, TSCPL developed a high-impact, flexible service that could be deployed communitywide. A planning team of library staff and community partners determined that a mobile classroom in a bookmobile-style bus was an optimal solution. “Our community partners not only helped us envision…the new service, they all agreed to be…shared collaborators [on] this project and the community impact goal,” enthuses Pyko.

“A shared goal and shared project builds a strong coalition of supporters and actual doers for the success of a project,” Pyko explains. “Everyone brings their expertise to the table, and when community partners are there from the very beginning, the sky is the limit on what they will do to help make the service successful.”

**TEAMING WITH TEACHERS**

TSCPL’s foundation sought private donor funds to purchase the bus and support the new service. TSCPL staff worked with local early learning experts to design the curriculum, staffing, and community involvement needs; they also determined the target audience and neighborhoods based on county demographics and available services. “It was essential to have early learning experts on the team to help determine the real needs for our families,” says Pyko. “Our partners shared their expertise on [designing] early learning services, and librarians facilitated the discussions and shared our expertise in designing library vehicle spaces and finding early learning resources.”

**GETTING ON BOARD**

Launched in February 2017, the Learn & Play Bus is a 40’ diesel vehicle containing a 10’ x 11’ story and activity space, ample storage for materials and flexible furniture, a changing table, and a sink for cleanup. The interior is brightly colored, with toys on shelves at kid height. The route began with four stops, with additional ones added on a quarterly basis.

The mobile preschool classroom provides weekly visits to neighborhoods throughout Topeka and Shawnee County, bringing learning through play and stories to children from birth to six.

Over one- to 2.5-hour visits, Pyko explains, families “have an opportunity to listen and interact during story time, play with early learning toys, and engage in messy art activities. Each leave…with handouts that cover what they learned…and also some fun…activities they can do at home.”

Sherry Hess, early learning coordinator, develops theme-focused curricula based on content in Topeka preschools, giving children the opportunity to develop kindergarten success skills. “Our goal is to build on the learning, week to week,” says Pyko, “so while families don’t have to attend weekly, there is a benefit to [doing so.] Often (as we had hoped) the same families do come,” which means that they can develop relationships with the staff and with other families. In addition to structured story times, free play is available to children at all times.

**CONNECTING TO CAREGIVERS**

Community learning experts are there to educate caregivers informally on language development, nutrition, and other health questions. “The goal is to be a...comfortable space so that caregivers have opportunities to talk with experts and be their child’s best teacher,” adds Pyko.

Given the reticence of many families in low-income neighborhoods to share personal information, the goals of the bus’s first year are to build relationships and encourage repeat attendance. The Learn & Play Bus has reached more than 250 families in the first six months; staff are seeing significant improvement in frequent visitors, especially in attention, language development, and social-emotional skills. Children feel more confident as they visit the bus, says Pyko. “Several parents have shared that their children leave the bus singing the songs [from] story time and are repeating key parts of songs when they [sing them] at home.”

For TSCPL, the Learn & Play Bus is just one strategy to reach a community impact goal of “all children enter school ready.” The library is evaluating all of its early childhood programs for scalability, replicability, and increased effectiveness and working to find key community partners. As Pyko says, “We won’t do anything alone.”
Online Learning Leads Back to the Library

At the Pima County Public Library (PCPL), Tucson, AZ, literacy in all areas is an integral part of what the library does. “Our mission is to transform lives by educating, inspiring, and connecting people,” says Holly Schaffer, PCPL community relations manager. “But none of that can be fully accomplished if individuals lack the knowledge to fervently pursue their goals, advocate for themselves, and contribute to their own (and our community’s) overall well-being.” As part of that mission, PCPL offers digital literacy classes in computer basics, online safety, job search help, and mobile tech essentials. Its in-person class attendance is strong, but, like many libraries, it was always looking for online learning resources.

ENTER DIGITALLEARN.ORG

In 2013, the Public Library Association (PLA) launched DigitalLearn.org, a website developed to build upon and support the work of libraries and community organizations nationwide.

From the start, PCPL saw the value in the site as an online extension of its in-library work. Explains Schaffer, “DigitalLearn is an easy-to-use tool for people who lack the basic computer skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century. These skills are no longer a luxury but a necessity. Without them, many things we do every day—and take for granted—become impossible hurdles: applying for jobs, verifying information, connecting with friends, and so on.”

DigitalLearn.org modules are video-based lessons—six to 22 minutes long—supplemented with printable handouts. Nearly all are available in English and Spanish. Courses include:
- Navigating a website
- Understanding privacy online
- Online job searching
- Creating résumés

customized site launched in April.

Schaffer describes the partnership as a natural fit. “Cox’s commitment to low-cost Internet, PLA’s dedication to limitless learning, and PCPL’s vision of an educated, connected community [combined to provide] our community with the training, knowledge, and inspiration that will bring about real change.”

ONLINE TO IN-PERSON

The site customization flips existing connections between online and in-person digital literacy support: instead of in-person resources pointing to online ones, each self-guided learning module points back to services offered by PCPL. Explains Schaffer, “For example, a visitor to the PCPL DigitalLearn site who views the ‘Why Should I Use a Computer?’ course will see links to the computer classes we offer at our libraries [as available].”

Beyond the obvious utility of the online courses, the custom site has two primary add-on benefits. First, knowing which online classes are popular and have high completion rates can help shape in-library classes.

Analytics for the custom site are already showing high use of the new service: in its second month, 131 users logged onto 156 sessions on topics such as Using a PC, Buying a Plane Ticket, Basic Search, and Intro to Skype.

Secondly, PCPL is working on how best to turn the online experience into in-person sessions, developing in-library classes based on DigitalLearn modules and additional supplemental materials for each course.

COHORT SUPPORT

The staff at PCPL are enthusiastic about the collaboration essential to the success of the program. Explains Schaffer, “Without this digital literacy initiative and the support of Cox Communications and PLA, PCPL wouldn’t have a customized version of DigitalLearn [that] allows us to engage with our customers and tailor our outreach and services to best meet their needs.”

They have also found much value in being one of a cohort, however small: being a part of the pilot customization project with two other libraries created an instant support network. “We’ve benefited from monthly calls…which have provided the space and time for collaborative brainstorming, learning from one another, and asking questions,” says Schaffer. Sometimes even innovators benefit from not going it alone.
Pop-Up Civic Lab Is a Great Experiment

At the Skokie Public Library (SPL), says Amy Koester, youth and family program supervisor, “we take the perspective that people need multiple literacies in order to be successful members of society.” The library constantly reevaluates strategic priorities based on annual reviews of community needs and global trends. “Civic engagement and literacy is one of those priorities at this time,” she adds. In winter 2015, SPL participated in a communitywide program called “Voices of Race.” The activities and programs were popular, especially the discussions of personal experiences with racial prejudice and a gallery wall where patrons and staff shared images and words around personal identity. “The level of interest and participation in ‘Voices of Race’ signaled... that our community had an as-yet-untapped interest in exploring conversations and topics related to race and identity,” says Koester, as well as other current events.

THE CIVIC LAB
To meet that need, from August to October 2016, SPL set up a “Civic Lab Boutique,” offering information and thought-provoking activities to support dialog on six areas: Black Lives Matter, climate change, immigration, income inequality, LGBTQIQ issues, and reproductive justice.

The goal was “twofold,” explains Koester. “Provide access to resources with a critical viewpoint on each topic and provide provocation for reflection and conversation... whether that be on one’s own or with other patrons and community members. Both active and passive elements have value and audience,” says Koester. “It’s integral to have elements that inspire both personal reflection and larger conversation.”

CREATION AND CURATION
Feedback from the pilot and requests from patrons after the presidential election led SPL to transfer elements of the boutique into a flexible, responsive program. Now, the Civic Lab is a series of pop-up installations that facilitate exploration and discussion of subjects affecting the community and the nation. The Civic Lab includes drop-in events facilitated by library staff and larger community-building programs.

Members of a five-person Learning Experiences team curate the Civic Lab’s library programs, sourcing items in the news and community interactions.

Successful pop-ups often stem from the personal interests of staff. A staff member’s participation in the protests at Standing Rock translated into a pop-up that gave participants more perspectives than news-casts. Similarly, a staffer’s interest in CRISPR-Cas9 (genome editing technology) led to conversations about medical technology and ethics. “Our resources are better curated, and our conversations more robust, when we engage with expertise and experience along with information,” adds Koester.

Once a topic is chosen, one team member becomes the lead facilitator, identifying other staff who might want to cofacilitate or curate materials; scheduling the date, time, and location of one or two pop-ups; adding them to the events calendar; and creating handouts with annotated resources. Related offerings include browsing collections of books, interactive digital media, trivia, voting questions, conversation starters, and more. Each pop-up lasts for one to two hours. SPL learned that facilitation is vital; engagement is higher when staff are present.

Flexible furniture is key: a dozen collapsible, stackable wooden crates become lecterns, display towers, seating, and more. Patrons ask questions, write responses to conversation prompts on sticky notes, and engage in discussion with staff. Costs are minimal, including the crates, a program banner and stand, a mobile iPad display, a microcollection of six titles, printing, and food.

To supplement the pop-ups, SPL has hosted two eight-hour community-building programs called “Together at the Table” in which attendees of every age and background were introduced to fellow residents and engaged in chat designed to help strangers connect on a human level.

OUTCOMES, OUTREACH
Attendance and voting responses for the events have been excellent, but it’s outcomes measurements that staff are looking at more closely. Over 30 percent of participants indicate they intend to learn more after participating in a Civic Lab and more than 80 percent say they’ve learned something.

Koester’s favorite outcome is embodied in a quote from a participant at a “How Does the Supreme Court Work?” pop-up. “You need to have good information in order to make up your own mind,” said the participant. “If you have bad information, someone else is making up your mind for you.”

SPL is also exploring ways to have the Civic Lab pop up outside of the building, Koester says, “expanding the civic engagement conversation further into the community.”
Cedar Falls is a small, active town in northeast Iowa, with a population of some 40,000 people who have increasingly disparate places of origin. Sheryl McGovern, director of the Cedar Falls Public Library (CFPL), is leading the way to meet their needs. “We [are] a relatively small community, but we’re seeing changes in our demographics, and we want to do what we can to support this growth in diversity,” she says.

In recent years, staff at CFPL have fielded more and more questions from patrons on how to get involved in the community and learn about global events on a local scale. Users also wanted more interaction, expressing interest in learning from other community members and groups.

**THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL**
In response, CFPL developed the Cultural Literacy Series (CLS): monthly events to bring the community together around a specific theme. Erin Thompson, library assistant, says the series “aims to tie global issues to the Cedar Falls community both for informational purposes [and] to facilitate community involvement. We desire to start conversations, encourage learning, and inspire connections.”

Beyond facilitating conversations, a secondary goal of the series is to provide better access to information to counteract fake/misleading information patrons bring to librarians’ attention. Organizations can provide accurate statistics and information, while the library itself can research misleading news stories and correct fraudulent facts.

**COMING TOGETHER**
The first CLS program was held in May 2017, a discussion about refugees and immigrants in the Cedar Valley, with a panel composed of individuals from local organizations—many of whom were current/former refugees or "dreamers" (beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals act). The second program, in June, featured the president of a local Islamic center speaking on “Refugees of the Syrian Civil War.”

CLS is a monthly, one- to two-hour program, usually held on a Wednesday evening. Participants are usually residents or representatives/members of community organizations; sometimes the library reaches out to agencies that might be a good fit, and sometimes individuals or organizations contact the library. The library works with presenters to encourage engagement by the community (especially through Q&A), then provides promotion, space, and technical support. Initially they’ve seen around a couple dozen attendees, and the library anticipates growth as word spreads.

**LESSONS LEARNED**
According to library staff, the primary lesson so far is the value of being prepared and being willing to take risks. The initial community response has been positive—“many of our patrons are thankful we started this series,” says McGovern—but staff are aware that Cedar Falls is a “blue city in a red state” and that patrons range across the political spectrum.

However, staff also believe that the library is a neutral political environment and that these conversations have a place there. In case of a disruptive patron, staff have a copy of library policies handy; to forestall complaints about CLS content, staff have prepared statements such as, “We can’t be held responsible for the fact that these social and cultural issues have been politicized.”

Even this early, McGovern considers CLS a success. “We’ll continue the CLS indefinitely,” she says. “It seems to me there will always be a need for a forum in which to discuss our changing cultural landscape.”

Presenters, participants, and staff working on the series “believe our library shouldn’t have a passive role in our community,” adds Thompson. “There’s a renewed interest in learning about social and cultural issues, and the library can provide access to programs in a neutral, free environment.”

**CULTURE IN COLOR**
While not part of the CLS program, a monthly “Coloring Anonymous” group held at CFPL has attracted a very culturally diverse group of people, according to library staff. “Unanticipated but wonderful,” enthuses McGovern. What began as a homogeneous group of residents has grown to include multiple cultures and speakers of at least four languages: English, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi.

In addition to providing a safe, welcoming activity that features a universal language (“Art!”), word of mouth is likely responsible for the diversity, says Thompson. It’s also a family-friendly program with materials provided, which makes a difference for many participants.
During a strategic planning process in 2012, staff at the Rochester Public Library (RPL) heard clearly that the community wanted to excel in workforce preparation, education, and being welcoming and inclusive. “Literacy is key for all those outcomes, therefore literacy had to be a priority for the library,” says Susan Hansen, librarian and webmaster at RPL. Today, after a revision in 2015, the library’s mission is simple: “We strengthen community and enrich lives by sparking imagination, creativity, engagement, and learning.”

THE WELLNESS CORNER
Also in 2012, library leaders met with local health practitioners to help identify community health needs. Based on that meeting, the library applied for and received a Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation grant for public libraries to pilot innovative programs. Hansen connects this to the mission: “Helping our residents—especially those with barriers to accessing traditional services and information formats—grow in their knowledge and access to community resources to increase their health and wellness is a ‘win’ for everyone.”

In late 2013, the library opened the Wellness Corner to address initial priorities of obesity, foot health, and navigating the health system. It “brings information to residents in our community in a safe, neutral location by offering one-on-one sessions in library space. We supply the ‘human’ information format, along with DVD, print, and audio,” through these partnerships, says Hansen.

“There is a wealth of health and wellness information from professionals in your community. Find ways to involve them, build partnerships, [and] attend their meetings so you can be well informed on what is happening in your community and can share that with your residents,” she advises.

Dedicated space is the primary asset the library offers. Use is free for any individual or organization, as long as they conform to the library’s program guidelines. Links on the library’s site invite new presenters to submit proposals, and the library reaches out to organizations to fill specific program gaps. RPL works with each partner to schedule events, series, or individual session times, then spearheads promotion efforts through posters, social media, and cross-promotion to other partners.

Once a partner has been there a few times, they’re largely self-sufficient. For example, Winona State University’s nursing program offers its students a service learning experience in public health by providing information, noninvasive health screenings, health topic classes, and health fairs; local nonprofits help residents register for health insurance; and individuals oversee t’ai chi chih classes and “Bone Builders” osteoporosis prevention programs.

Since opening in 2013, there has been steady growth in offerings and attendance. In 2016, a total of 2,355 Wellness Corner program hours served 3,578 persons; of that, partners contributed 2,323 hours of program time and library staff provided the remaining 22 hours. These programs require minimal oversight—Hansen spends about ten to 12 hours monthly on promotion and related activities—and come at nearly no cost to the library.

IMPACTS & OUTCOMES
Sometimes, the value is lifesaving. A person who, “on a lark,” visited the nurses in “The Corner,” said, “I’m so thankful you had [the nurses] here. I would never have known I had a problem with high blood pressure. I was encouraged to get an appointment and now I’m being treated.”

“Library staff have also increased participation on a variety of local committees, such as the Homeless Community Network or the Community Health Needs Assessment Group,” adds Hansen, “to share what issues they see or hear from residents and provide input on future plans and policy changes.”

NEXT STEPS
As of the time of this writing, the popular Bone Builders program has had to move to another location to accommodate the crowds. A capital project to expand the aging library building will proceed with the Wellness Corner’s needs in mind.

RPL’s next steps are to expand Wellness Corner offerings through additional partners (especially in the non-English-speaking community) and in new programs on diet and nutrition, based on feedback from participant surveys. RPL is also exploring the possibility of adding a full-time social worker or nurse, either in partnership with a community organization or via a grant-funded position.
Plotting Sustainability Through Farming

In 2010, the Northern Onondaga Public Library was seeking new ways to offer services and learning opportunities to its community. “Literacy services of many types are a priority,” explains Cicero Branch manager Jill Youngs, “but the LibraryFarm came at a time when community literacy had extended beyond reading and writing.” The large property available at the Cicero Branch naturally lent itself to an outdoor effort, especially when staff were inspired by a quote from the Roman orator and town namesake Marcus Tuullius Cicero: “If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need.”

LIBRARY FARM
The stated mission of the Northern Onondaga LibraryFarm is to “provide a place for the community to grow, share, and learn about food literacy and sustainable gardening.” However, that’s just the tip of the iceberg, explains Aaron Ross, LibraryFarm manager. “The LibraryFarm provides an environment where the community [can] learn about growing food in a clean, organic way and discover how that pertains to [their] overall health and the health of our community.”

“The LibraryFarm is an integral component of the [library] and provides the momentum for library programming related to food literacy, sustainable gardening and practices, and nutrition and health,” says Youngs.

In June, a staff member presented “Food Literacy: Defining Local,” which was very well received and well instructed. Programs have included workshops on hypertufa containers (planters constructed from a combination of Portland cement, vermiculite, and peat moss) and building simple hoop-style greenhouses over a field or planting bed to protect plants from the elements and extend the growing season. Lectures cover soils, composting, harvesting, preserving, pests, worm farms, and information sessions on local farmers. Programs are provided by library staff, local organic farmers, or members of nonprofits such as the Cornell [University] Cooperative Extension.

GROWING THEIR OWN
The LibraryFarm is largely self-regulating. Participants—“aka plotters”—sign up early in the year to manage a raised bed for the growing season. They agree to follow set rules, including growing organically and being willing to welcome and inform visitors to the LibraryFarm. In addition to standard gardening, newer cultivation methods are encouraged, such as square foot gardening—a grid-based planting technique that encourages a small, densely planted vegetable and herb garden—and “lasagna layering,” a compost-based, nutrient-rich gardening style.

“The program depends upon people with different backgrounds, capabilities, and goals—as such, it’s important to be flexible to accommodate and support individual creativity,” says Youngs. At the same time, setting firm rules and expectations for all participants ensures that the program stays focused on the educational goals.

Initial program costs were offset by using repurposed pallets for the raised beds; the farm shares labor, tools, and compost and is the headquarters for an annual summer Nature Camp for children—two of the farm’s plots are gardened by campers.

The LibraryFarm tracks its progress by collecting comments from plotters and measuring produce using a scale and donation log book. “Last season (2016),” says Ross, “we donated over 400 pounds of fresh food to local pantries.” This season, the farm has 50 raised beds or flat plots, containers, and perennial beds and hopes to increase its donations.

WORTH IT BUT NOT EASY
While the farm is a very effective visual focus for interactive food literacy and sustainability learning, it takes a significant investment in time, space, and staff energy. For Northern Onondaga, this investment is worth it; however, other libraries might find that a few raised beds, hydroponic indoor gardening, or even a worm farm (vermiculture) are more sustainable options.
The San José Public Library (SJPL) has reenvisioned its public service model with four guiding principles: customers first, teach customers, reinvent environments, and enable staff. Literacy is a core part of this focus, stresses Jill Bourne, SJPL director and LJ’s 2017 Librarian of the Year. “It is a priority for SJPL to reach out and engage with underserved populations who are marginalized in society due to low literacy and provide services to the community to foster its mission of lifelong learning for all.... All five of our strategic priorities include a commitment to supporting various community literacies.” As a result, SJPL’s literacy programs are comprehensive and strive to reach the widest possible population, targeting adult, early/play, digital, life skills, and family literacy support.

**ADULT LEARNER LITERACY**

In 1987, the California State Library (CSL) began encouraging local libraries to develop adult literacy programs, setting the stage for decades of innovation. SJPL has four such programs: Partners in Reading (PAR), Together We Read (TWR), ESL classes, and Gale’s Career Online High School (COHS).

The cornerstone of adult literacy at SJPL is Partners in Reading, active since 1989. This one-on-one tutoring program matches library-trained tutors with adult learners, creating unique plans based on learner assessments. Learners set their own goals for reading, writing, and technology skills, and program coordinators instruct tutors on customized curriculum and tools.

Family literacy has also been a library service since 1989; today, the TWR program aims to interrupt the cycle of generational low literacy. “The goal is to foster a love of reading for children and the entire family and help children with school readiness and school work,” says Bourne. As part of TWR, participants in the PAR program with children aged 14 and under learn to model reading and writing skills with their children. Families receive free children’s books six times a year plus suggested seasonal activities and crafts.

Two more targeted adult literacy programs are for English-language learners and adults without high school degrees. Specialists provide beginner and intermediate ESL classes at two locations, while an advanced conversation class led by a PAR literacy specialist focuses on cultural awareness, traditions, and world events. The COHS program offers residents 19 and older a scholarship for participation and staff-based homework support. Applicants complete a self-assessment through CSL and are screened locally by PAR staff; eligible participants must have completed eighth grade, speak and write English, and be comfortable working on their own a computer.

Success for these programs has been consistent and measurable. Replies to PAR satisfaction surveys show the program is incredibly effective: 93.7 percent of learners met at least one goal, while 81.7 percent of ESL learners did so. The COHS program has awarded 63 scholarships; to date, six people have graduated.

“Having staff with expertise in adult learning and volunteer engagement and service are critical elements,” acknowledges Bourne. SJPL is working to improve links with local organizations for support in work readiness, job growth/improvement, career and small business readiness, and higher education.

**EARLY/PLAY LITERACY**

In its early literacy programs, SJPL has prioritized caregiver needs as much as children’s. A 2007 study...reported that 57 percent of parents/caregivers experienced...depression,” says Bourne. “A noted support/solution...was to have opportunities for caregivers to interact and not be so isolated.” This, combined with the social learning needs of children not in formal preschool (nearly 72 percent of the library’s story time audience), led SJPL to focus on play.

SJPL story times are followed by a “Stay and Play” period, so librarians can interact with families in a less formal setting while children engage in unstructured play and caregivers socialize. At ten SJPL locations, Wee Play Centers provide open-ended access to learning-based toys and comfortable, safe environments for families. Finally, two Wee Playdates are scheduled each month at rotating locations for children from birth to five years old, with age-appropriate activities for children and library staff available to discuss with caregivers the importance of play.

The Stay and Play sessions and Wee Play Centers are low-staff involvement but do incur costs for buying and replacing learning-focused toys. Maintenance is made easier via Dirty Toy Buckets, in which patrons are encouraged to place soiled toys to be sanitized. Systemwide toy replacement happens annually, but branches rely on individual Friends groups for extra replacements.

Wee Playdate toys tend to be large and elaborate: blocks that children use to construct houses and towers, pop-up tents and tunnels, Crocodile Rockers, and sculpting clay with professional tools. Posters advocate the importance of play and how to support child development.

SJPL introduced Stay and Play sessions in 2008; Wee
San José Public Library

Overall Strategic Integration

Play Centers and Wee Playdates followed in 2015. The results have been overwhelmingly positive, as surveys conducted in fall 2016 indicate:

- My family is more engaged in learning opportunities (talking, playing, or singing together) because of the library: 86 percent
- I read much more to my child as a result of attending programs at the library: 95 percent
- I feel the library provides important learning experiences for my child or children: 92 percent
- Having toys available for my family to play with helps my family to play with: 87 percent

"At the beginning, the idea of seeing toys as a material with the same level of importance as our books and other traditional library materials was very hard for some of our staff—especially the clerical staff who had to tidy the toys—to wrap their heads around," says Bourne. Prioritization is key, as is involving staff early and often in program development. "A staff training manual was developed to help staff understand the 'why' of the program," Bourne adds, helping with buy-in.

Also, translating the importance of play into languages other than English proved challenging. "Direct translation [from English... was not effective (especially with Asian languages)," says Bourne. "We brought in a few native-speaking librarians and had them rework the language."

The next fiscal year will see an overall evaluation of SJPL early education programs using the Center for the Study of Social Policy's "Strengthening Families Program Self-Assessment." The goal is to create a plan to help serve and support families more effectively and design a formal literacy curriculum for the entire system.

Digital Literacy

SJPL responded to an increasing interest in and need for information about online safety with the Virtual Privacy Lab (VPL), a free, web-based platform that empowers patrons to make informed decisions about online behaviors. According to Bourne, "Users are guided through seven different modules and are asked questions about their privacy preferences. Based on those answers, they are given a personalized toolkit with links, tips, and resources that will assist them in being safe and confident online."

"Adulting" Literacy

As part of a Eureka Leadership Institute project in early 2016, 2017 LJ Mover & Shaker Erik Berman conducted a study of San José's teens to identify needs. After face-to-face interviews with more than 200 young people, says Bourne, "the overwhelming majority indicated that they were most worried about the future, getting a job, attending college, and simply being an adult." As a result, SJPL developed Life Skills Academy, piloted in March 2016 and now offered monthly or bimonthly.

Each 90-minute workshop teaches essential life skills as teens transition from high school to college, their first job, and living on their own. Subjects, taught by professionals in related fields, include "Why you shouldn’t have 27 credit cards" (financial literacy), "There are no potty breaks in college" (the college experience), and "Pizza is not a food group" (healthy cooking). Each is recorded and posted online along with handouts and slides. "Our final goal is to turn each workshop into a replicable curriculum we can pass on to other libraries," adds Bourne. Each session averages 20 or more participants, mostly in the 14–19 age range. Surveys indicate that they are desperately needed: preworkshop surveys report that more than 75 percent of participants feel unprepared to handle the topic, while postworkshop surveys drop to only 18 percent. SJPL has a growing mailing list of parents who want to be notified about the program. Marketing directly to parents is the most successful tactic for outreach. Unlike for teen programs, parents signed teens up as often as teens showed interest.

Family Learning Centers (FLCs), first opened in 2005 at seven branch libraries, offer service to families and individuals—especially immigrants and new Americans—in response to the changing needs of their immediate communities. Currently, the program includes citizenship preparation, English-language, literacy, parenting, and basic life skills. "Each FLC has a coordinator (a literacy program specialist) who strives to make branches less intimidating and more welcoming to the immigrant community," explains Bourne. They connect with their communities via conversations, surveys, partnering with organizations, and informal links to individuals; they use partnerships and volunteers to augment their programs and events. Adds Bourne, "[The FLC program] allows staff members to have a deep understanding of the community rhythms and build a solid rapport/trust with other stakeholders."

In semiannual surveys, 85 percent of participants report that their own or their child's reading, writing, or verbal English skills improved as a result of these programs. Efforts are under way to recruit additional partners and volunteers to extend classes and programming further.