

Grant Proposal for Escambia County Library's Early Literacy Program

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I. Executive Summary

Escambia County Library's primary mission is to "act as the community's independent learning center for residents of all ages who live in Escambia County, Florida" (Newell, 2013). To that end, ECL has identified the community's young children as an underserved population in the population of Escambia County. With 18.5% of its children living below the poverty level, and roughly half of its elementary school-aged children testing below satisfactory in English and Language Arts, Escambia County needs its library to support early literacy efforts, especially in disadvantaged communities. ECL aims to build a new early literacy library which will allow parents to check out literacy kits to complete with their children. This self-guided program will allow families to improve their children's literacy skills outside of the library on their own schedule. Additionally, the early literacy library will encourage parents to become more involved in their children's educational development, which is considered by the National Institute for Literacy to be one of the major factors in increasing early literacy in children. ECL aims to partner with community schools to raise state test scores and track measurable improvement in children's engagement with books and their motivation to learn independently. ECL plays a vital role as an independent learning center for families, especially in the summer months when children do not have access to daily instruction and the materials in their school's library. Through advertising and outreach by the library and its partners, the early literacy program will be introduced to the underserved population that needs it most. The creation of the early literacy library space and acquisition of materials, along with the initial organizational and labor costs amounts to \$11,568.00.

II. Background

The Library

The Escambia County Library system serves communities throughout Escambia County, Florida. The library was founded in 1938, and it has increased its collection from 3,300 books to almost 300,000 books and audio-visual items (Newell, 2013). Its main branch is located in Pensacola, FL, where it is

open to a city population of approximately 50,000 residents. Five additional branches, as well as a genealogy branch, serve the surrounding metro area of approximately 400,000 residents. All seven library locations hold a combined total of almost 300,000 books, which can be circulated and transferred between branches.

Escambia County Library is committed to encouraging lifelong learning among its patrons, and this goal is especially important for children and the promotion of early literacy. The library currently offers weekly storytimes for young children and “lap sit” programs for toddlers and infants at each of its branches. The library hosts a yearly summer reading program and holds events for children, teens, and their families throughout the summer. A main initiative of the ECL in its five-year strategic plan is to “maintain an age-appropriate pre-literacy collection for children from birth to 5 years old” (Newell, 2013). ECL is currently able to maintain children’s collections and host programs within the library at each of its branches; however, out-of-library programs are currently limited to recommendations for storytelling websites and third-party homework help services.

The Community

The demographic statistics of Escambia County and the city of Pensacola are very similar; the county’s population is 68.9% White, 22.9% Black, 4.7% Hispanic, and 2.7% Asian, and the city’s population is 66.3% White, 28.0% Black, 3.3% Hispanic, and 2.0% Asian (United States Census Bureau, 2010). However, the racial distributions of many of Escambia County’s public schools do not accurately represent the composition of the overall population. The non-Hispanic black population at an average school in the county is at 55.4% dissimilarity, which is “the proportion of one racial group that would need to relocate to another school in order for the racial composition of each school to mirror the racial composition of all students in the metro area as a whole. A value of 0% represents complete integration and a value of 100% represents complete segregation” (Diversity Data, 2011). Additionally, the average poverty rate for primary school children at county schools is 74% for the non-Hispanic black population

(Diversity Data, 2011). The households with the highest poverty rates in Escambia County are concentrated more heavily around the main library branch in the city of Pensacola (City-Data, 2013). For this reason, the pilot program for early literacy will be located at the main branch in the city of Pensacola.

III. Statement of Need

National literacy assessments have shown that nearly one-third of school-age children in grades K-12 are unable to read and write at a level that allows them to complete schoolwork successfully (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). These numbers grow even larger for economically disadvantaged and/or minority students. As a whole, low-income and minority households have decreased access to educational resources during the summer when school is not in session, and this “summer loss” can lead to the regression of any writing and reading skills gained during the school year (Bracey, 2002). Because of this disparity in education access, not all children will enter school with the same language abilities.

Out of the 31 elementary schools in Escambia County, 13 are on the State of Florida’s list of the 300 lowest performing elementary schools, and all of these 13 schools are located in Pensacola, FL (Florida Department of Education, 2016). In all county elementary schools, 52% of third graders, 52% of fourth graders, and 54% of fifth graders scored at levels 1 and 2 in the Florida State Assessment in 2015 (Escambia School District, 2015). Any score below a 3 on the FSA is considered below satisfactory in the subjects English and Language Arts.

Studies conducted by the National Institute for Literacy have shown that the amount of language skills learned from ages 0 to 5 has a direct impact on success in school later in life; this effect has the most impact on performance in kindergarten and first grade (2008). The National Institute for Literacy recommends five interventional methods that can increase literacy skills in young children; among them, shared-reading and parent-and-home programs have been proven to have “a moderate to large effect on oral language outcomes and general cognitive abilities.” (2008, p. viii). The Escambia

County Library system can assist with these interventional methods by encouraging parents to read and interact with their children, especially during the summer when patrons do not have access to their school's library. Because the ECL main branch serves the majority of the disadvantaged households in Escambia County, the early literacy program will be implemented at this location first for maximum impact. ECL does not currently provide early literacy instruction outside of library facilities. Many young children, especially those whose parents and guardians work during storytimes, are disadvantaged by not being able to access these literacy-developing programs and in-library computer software as often as other children who come from more privileged households. ECL currently lacks an early literacy program (beyond basic book circulation) that extends outside of the library into individual homes. The implementation of a self-guided early literacy library will help area schools maintain children's literacy during the summer months, and parents can help their children improve their literacy skills throughout the year with take-home materials from the early literacy library.

IV. Proposed Project

Early Literacy Library: General Layout

ECL will create a dedicated space at the main branch library in Pensacola, FL, for an early literacy library aimed at improving the oral and written language skills of children aged 0 to 5. Current shelf space in the children's section will be rearranged and repurposed in order to accommodate 100 new circulating literacy kits. The kits will be stored primarily at the main branch, but they may be requested and transferred to any other branch of the library through the Integrated Library System. Display of the early literacy library will be centered around an Early Literacy Station, which will be purchased as a companion to the 100 new collection items. The Early Literacy Station is a computer system pre-loaded with literacy programs, and it does not support Internet-connectivity. Children are already able to access Internet-based software in the library's computer labs. The Early Literacy Station will be a dedicated-use computer targeted specifically towards children aged 2 to 8, as well as their parents. The

pairing of the Early Literacy station with the 100-item collection will serve the purpose of promoting both language and technological literacy skills.

Early Literacy Kits

Each circulating early literacy kit will consist of one board book, one activity sheet for parents, one handout for children, one pack of crayons, and one optional survey. Each kit will be displayed and stored in clear hanging plastic bags so that titles may be easily browsed and easily stored by borrowers. The 100 board book titles will be selected by the Children's Librarian, under the supervision of the Library Director. The Children's Librarian will make book selections based on professional knowledge and research, as well as the recommendations of respected early literacy programs such as ALA's Babies Need Words Every Day, the U.S. Department of Education's America Reads, etc. Free printable activity sheets for parents as well as a completable handout for children will be selected to accompany each title by the Children's Librarian. The activity sheets will include suggested exercises, rhymes, songs, and games that parents can complete with their children, as well as a description of what skills the book and activities are exercising. The activity sheets and handouts will be required to utilize one of the six literacy skills identified by the National Institute for Literacy: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or numbers, RAN of objects or colors, writing or writing name, or phonological memory (2008, p. vii). This process will take approximately 180 hours of work, to be completed over 8 weeks before the program is launched. The paper handouts and surveys will be printed within the library, and library volunteers will build the kits and replenish handouts as needed when kits are returned before being shelved. The distribution framework for the kits is already in place; the existing library system for circulation and holds will be utilized, and the system will not be unduly burdened by the addition of 100 new items.

Outreach

The early literacy library will be promoted through posters and flyer handouts within the library itself, as well as at regular county events (e.g. booths at the Pensacola Interstate Fair, etc.) and at county schools. The early literacy library will be promoted as a resource for parents all at family events and storytimes for young children. The library's website will promote the new library through links to the kits in the catalog, pictures and examples of the items in the "Resources for Kids" section, as well as through postings through affiliate social media websites. Advertising language will be inclusive in order to reach a multicultural audience, as well as disadvantaged populations within the community. Because the program is focused on poor and minority children, efforts will be made to advertise outside of the library, recruiting potential customers more heavily than current patrons. ECL will work with local partners in order to reach the families it is attempting to help. Specifically, ECL will work librarians and media specialists at county schools to identify those communities which are in need of literacy programs, as well as facilitate feedback between school teachers and ECL librarians. ECL's partnerships with local school media specialists will be integral to advertising the library's program, particularly before school ends for summer break. ECL will also build on its relationships with local hospitals and doctors in order to promote the importance of early literacy and make parents aware of the self-guided materials available at the library.

After the initial collection has been acquired, items will need to be re-evaluated and sometimes replaced. ECL will rely on fundraising and book donations from partner schools, as well as donations from the general public. Books weeded from the general children's collection may also be added to the early literacy library if they possess the proper criteria, to be evaluated by the children's librarian.

Outcome

In order to ensure that the early literacy program is effective in increasing early literacy skills, qualitative research will be conducted in the form of surveys. The primary form of data collection will come from self-assessments of parents who have checked out the literacy kits. Each kit will include a

survey that asks parents to note their children’s improvements (or lack thereof) in oral and written language skills. The surveys will ask parents to rank their children’s ability to identify letters and numbers, recall oral instruction, recognize shapes and colors, etc. The surveys will also ask qualitative questions about perceived progress in the child’s literacy skills. Parents will be asked to rate their child’s engagement with books and development of social skills. In order to achieve maximum response, the surveys will be short and composed primarily of close-ended questions, and patrons will be assured that their names will be kept confidential in any published reports. The benefits of returning the survey (e.g. ensuring the continued funding of the program) will be emphasized, but it will be made clear that the surveys are entirely voluntary, and library card numbers will be used in place of names to prevent identification if surveys are returned along with the kits. Additionally, school librarians and media specialists will be invited to participate in qualitative interviews to study the effects of the program during summer months at the start of the school year.

During the first year of the program, circulation will be tracked, and a baseline will be established for usage of the early literacy library. If increased demand is evident through increased circulation statistics after the first year, ECL plans to expand the program at each of the library’s branches, as well as community centers and public health centers.

Budget

<i>Library Equipment</i>	
AWE Learning Early Literacy Station (1)	\$3,150.00
Brodart Hanging Bag Display (1)	\$1,100.00
Brodart Hanging Plastic Bags (100)	\$125.00
Board Books: average price \$7 (100)	\$700.00
Activity Sheets Printed In-Library (1000)	\$100.00
Surveys Printed In-Library (1000)	\$100.00
Crayon Packs (240)	\$140.00
<i>Labor</i>	
Library Director Supervision (5 hours/week)	\$1,800.00

Children's Librarian Book Selection and Activity Sheet Selection (20 hours/week x 8 weeks)	\$4,000.00
Volunteers to Print Materials, Prepare Kits, and Replenish Kits	free

<i>Advertising</i>	
Vistaprint 16" x 20" Posters (20)	\$153.00
Flyers Printed In-Library (2000)	\$200.00

Total:	\$11,568.00
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V. Conclusion

The disappointing test scores and literacy rates of young children in Escambia County cannot be solved by the schools alone. Escambia County Library must achieve its goal of providing equitable service to all patrons by recognizing that some children in our county are better prepared for school than others. The library's new early literacy program will help to close the educational gap between school years during the summer months, as well as build a foundation for lifelong learning among disadvantaged families in the community. This specific early literacy library will fulfill a need that has been neglected until now; it will bring free educational materials and activities into individual homes in order to encourage parents to read with their children and interact on their own schedule, which has been proven to improve the oral and written language skills of children aged 0-5. By targeting the early literacy skills of young children in this community, ECL will positively affect the literacy rates and test scores of children many years in the future. Having the early literacy program already in place will allow ECL to partner with local groups and businesses and demonstrate how the library's services can make a positive difference for young children in the community, especially those children from minority and economically disadvantaged households.

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