

Idaho Partnership Proves Successful

The partnership between the Idaho State Department of Education (SDE) and the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) has produced some great results in the past three years. In 2012, Shannon Dunstan, Early Childhood & Interagency Coordinator at the SDE, and Stephanie Bailey-White at the Idaho Commission for Libraries starting meeting to find ways to facilitate access to books and other early literacy resources for children in developmental preschool programs. A first step was to conduct a baseline survey of preschool teachers to assess what their relationship with public and school library staff was and determine if children in their programs had access to books.

The 2012 survey was completed by 100 of the 182 developmental preschool teachers and supervisors. The survey found that very few of the 3,146 children served in Idaho's developmental preschool at that time were supported with access to books through school or public libraries. While 90 of the 100 teachers who responded to the survey indicated they had a classroom library, only 14 percent said students could check out books to take home and 74 percent did not have a book budget to support their classroom libraries. Forty-five percent of the teachers indicated their students regularly visit their elementary school library, but very few of those visits include checking out books to take home. Only 10 percent indicated their school library allowed students in the developmental preschool programs to check out books.

Those numbers were confirmed with a separate elementary school library survey conducted by the Commission for Libraries in September, 2012. The ICfL contacted the 375 public elementary school libraries in Idaho; 247 chose to respond for a 65.9% response rate. Survey participants in 75 percent of the schools said preschoolers couldn't check out books. Small to nonexistent book budgets were often cited as the reason why students in the lower grades were not allowed to check out books to take home. The survey showed that 62 percent had book budgets of under \$1,000 and one in four had budgets of under \$100 or no budget to purchase books.

A few school library staff indicated preschool students could check out books to take back to their classroom or that they check out books to the teachers, but reading research clearly shows that more access to books in homes increases literacy development.

When asked how the teachers would characterize the relationship between their preschool and the local public library, 56 percent said they had no relationship with anyone at the public library. Two teachers said they had a very close relationship with local public library staff, 11 percent said local librarians visit their classrooms once or twice per year, and seven indicated the local library provides free books for children either through ICfL's My First Books program or on their own.

The preschool teachers included comments on their surveys that show there were challenges to ensuring that more Idaho children gain access to age-appropriate books. English as a second language, packed schedules, and communication issues between principals, school media staff, and preschool teachers were listed as issues to overcome.

Strategies to Increase Access for Children

Three main strategies were developed by the SDE and ICfL to help address these barriers:

- 1) Launching an elementary school library mini-grant program aimed at changing check-out policies for children in developmental preschool programs, kindergarten and first grade.
- 2) Promoting new and existing outreach programs for Idaho's public libraries to use to enhance partnerships at the local level and increase access to books for children in developmental preschool programs; and
- 3) Increasing awareness of Idaho's developmental preschool programs among Idaho library staff through professional development opportunities, while encouraging preschool teachers to develop relationships with library staff at the same time.

These three strategies have proved highly successful. The mini-grant program was funded with \$100,000 in state funds through Idaho's legislature starting in 2012-2013, with the survey results providing much of the documentation for the need for improved funding for Idaho's elementary school budgets. Schools could apply for \$1,000 to \$5,000 in grant funds to purchase books for the youngest grades if they agreed to allow all children in developmental preschool programs, kindergarten and first grade to check out more than one book to take home starting in the fall semester. At least 40 percent of the funds were to be spent on nonfiction titles, and training was provided to school library staff on selection guidelines, weeding, and other techniques for increasing literacy opportunities. In 2014-2015 a one-time increase in funding from \$100,000 to \$200,000 was appropriated to help meet the demand for grant funds. In the past three years, 92 elementary schools have received mini-grants and 69 of those schools had preschool programs on school grounds. Very few of those schools originally allowed children in developmental preschool

programs to check out books. In fact, one-third of kindergarten students were not allowed to check out books to take home the first semester of school. The grant funds provided enough of a "carrot" to change policies and work with teachers to ensure library time and book checkout were part of the regular routine.



Fifth graders in Troy Elementary, a 2013-14 mini-grant site, read to children in the developmental preschool program.

School library staff who completed interim and final reports as part of their grant requirements found these changes to be much more positive than they anticipated, and a follow-up study done by Boise State University Literacy Professor Dr. Roger Stewart after Year 1 of the grant found that all of the libraries had maintained the checkout policies after the grant year was complete. A sampling of representative comments from the Final Grant Reports follow:

“It [the grant] was a great jumpstart. I am not sure I would have ever checked out to Preschool if the grant hadn't said I had to. Now, I would never not check out to them.”

“Feedback from a preschool parent that library is her child’s favorite weekly activity. Also, my preschool teachers were hesitant about library time, but are now fully supportive and very positive. We have been thrilled with the community’s support. Our PTO is building us two new shelving units so we can have dedicated space for our early-learning library.”

“This was the first time in the history of Fruitland elementary that preschool students were able to check out books from the school library. We are all very excited about this fact. We feel it was a success because we only had one book come back with some kind of damage. We loved visiting the library as a class and the whole process of checkout out a book. The kids were so proud of themselves.”

“I am so excited to see the younger kids being read to more at home, and the preschoolers getting a jump start on reading and loving books. Also, our collection is in great need of weeding and replacing, and our budget does not allow for it. We need new books badly, so I am thrilled to order new ones!”

“The preschool! Before this year the teacher would check out books, but I never saw the children. These kids love coming to the library! They look forward to it every day, so I have been told anyway! They are picking up some good reading habits.”

Dr. Stewart has reviewed the grant reports each year and reported on some general themes that were taken from reading all of the reports:

- A very strong theme emerged of children and teachers being excited about the new books. Nonfiction was specifically mentioned as being highly popular by four schools.
- Children learning about the library and all the books it has to offer.
- Teachers and librarians have been pleasantly surprised at the lack of damage and lost books. They have also been pleasantly surprised that the children are returning the books on time.

During this year’s legislative session the Commission for Libraries requested \$200,000 for the mini-grants in ongoing funding. Once a school has received a mini-grant, they need to wait five years to apply again to ensure that more schools have the opportunity to receive funds. Schools that have developmental preschool programs on school grounds are ranked higher when the committee makes the award selections.

The second strategy of increasing access to books and early literacy resources via public library partnerships has also been very successful. The Commission for Libraries received a three-year National Leadership Grant in 2013 which allowed them to launch a new “Books to Go” book lending program. Public libraries work with community partners, usually Head Start, developmental preschool programs, and private preschools, to place Books to Go bins at the partners sites. Each bin contains 30 themed bags and each bag contains four age-appropriate books along with a parent handout on how to extend the book reading time with easy

activities. Additional bilingual Spanish/English themed bags, bags for infants and toddlers, and some Braille books are also available depending on the needs of the partners. Books that are lost or damaged are replaced at no cost with no questions asked. The themed bags are also available for use by teachers during the day. During the past two years, Books to Go bins have been placed in 34 developmental preschool programs. Feedback to the program has been very positive from parents and teachers alike. A sampling of feedback from teachers or directors includes:

"Our families are utilizing the Books to Go program every week. They appreciate the opportunity to have different choices of books and activities to implement at home. It is a wonderful way to help create literacy awareness." - Stacey Barcas, Barbara Morgan Elementary School in McCall

"I talked to a parent who thanked me for the program and told me that they were reading a larger genre of books than they ever had because of the *Books to Go* program. They loved the fact that the selections were grouped by theme, and felt that they had widened their horizons by using the program. Her child was in the developmental preschool."

"I know this program was an immense labor of love, and I want to commend all the people who put it together. This program is one of the most positive and effective programs I have seen in Idaho public schools for many years. Thank you very much."

The Commission for Libraries plans to continue to offer Books to Go after the grant period ends. Another program that public libraries offer developmental preschool partners, My First Books, provides a book each month during the school year for children to keep. At the end of the nine months, each child has a home library of nine books and hopefully a library card that opens the world of reading to them. The My First Book program has been offered by the Commission for Libraries since 1996 and many developmental preschool programs have been partners over the years.

The final strategy employed by the SDE and ICfL has been increasing awareness of both programs within their target groups. ICfL invited Shannon Dunstan to present to librarians at their annual Read to Me meeting in 2012 to share information about who the program serves, where preschool programs operate, and best ways to partner with busy teachers. Commission staff have also written articles about the preschool program in their monthly e-newsletter. SDE staff have helped promote the mini-grant program and share information about other library resources on a regular basis.

The SDE sent a revised version of the 2012 baseline survey to all preschool teachers in March, 2015. Fewer people responded to the 2015 survey (57 responses) and many indicated children in their programs still do not have access to books to take home. While 32 (or 56%) said they were located within elementary schools, 47% said their students could not check out books. When asked how they would characterize the relationship between their preschool and local public library, 27 people (47% of respondents) said they had no relationship with their public library. Those who responded that they had a positive relationship cited many collaborative programs and regular contact with the public librarian in their community. When asked What could your public and/or school library do to better meet your needs? Suggestions included:

- More books and activities that are developmentally appropriate
- Send monthly calendars home to the parents of special library events
- I would like more cooperation with the public library, maybe incorporating some field trips to the library or have library personnel come to visit us at preschool. If they could advertise their activities, that may help to get more participation with the library activities.
- Our school and library do the best they can in providing funding for books for our preschool library, the books to go program, and a monthly story time from the library liaison. The State has cut funding for any outside field trips, this includes at least a visit twice a year to our public library.
- Open earlier in the day. We used to go weekly and have story time, but the library doesn't open until 1 p.m. now so the kids have gone home by then.
- We love our school librarian. She is helpful and is great with our students!
- The books in the preschool library are old and most of which are torn. Teachers primarily buy their own books for their libraries, and students don't have access to taking them home.
- The Wendell and Gooding Librarians are so enthusiastic and share that with the Head Start children and the parents. Last year the Gooding Librarian wrote a grant so the Head Start children received free books. How can we possibly stress the IMPORTANCE of early childhood literacy!! Thank you to our Libraries!

While significant, measurable progress has occurred during the past three years, staff turnover and other barriers to service for preschool students remain in place, making ongoing collaborative efforts a necessary part of both agencies' work plans. ICfL staff were very pleased that the 2015 Legislature and Governor supported the request to provide \$200,000 in ongoing state funds for the mini-grants to help meet the demand. The agency is working on plans for school library staff training in July and August. The ICfL and SDE coordinators believe this partnership is one of the best they have been involved with in the many years they have been in their line of work, and hope to see the progress continue into the future.