



Chicago Public Library STEAM Team First Assistant Librarian Alejandra Santana (left) reads to storytime attendees at Bubbleland laundromat.

Front-Loading Literacy

Laundromat reading initiatives bring together books, bubbles

BY Anne Ford

Laudrery: It's got to be done. And if you're in a family with small children and no washer or dryer at home, it's got to be done at the neighborhood laundromat—probably every week, probably on the same day every week, and probably with those children in tow.

That's why, in 1989, Chicago Public Library (CPL) Children's Librarian Elizabeth McChesney (now CPL's director of children's services and family engagement) visited a local laundromat to introduce herself to families. How she responded to what she saw there would help change the landscape of children's literacy initiatives for decades to come.

"What I saw was that these were families who, because of a variety of circumstances, were not likely to come to the library for storytime,"

she says. So she went back to the library, threw some books, a couple of puppets, and a tambourine into a laundry basket, walked it back to the laundromat, and held a storytime for the kids there—right on the spot, as the washers whirred.

McChesney's not claiming she started the laundry-and-literacy movement. "People have done this off and on for the last 25, 30 years," she says. Still, thanks to her, CPL continues to hold regular storytimes at laundromats across Chicago. And, she says, the librarians who participate continue to see rewards.

"Families are now changing their behavior, showing up to do their laundry when the library is going to be there," she reports. "One little boy just recently said: 'Let's do laundry every day, Mom!'"

Laundry literacy programs have recently sprung up all over the country, including some sponsored by the Laundry and Literacy Coalition (LLC), a large-scale partnership formed last year between Libraries Without Borders (LWB), the Clinton Foundation's Too Small to Fail (TSTF) early-childhood initiative, and the Coin Laundry Association's LaundryCares Foundation (LCF). Along the way, thousands of children have benefited from the chance to hone their early-literacy skills in an everyday setting, often with their parents participating, often on a regular basis, and always for free.

Unhampered access

Can't these children simply go to a branch library instead? Not necessarily. As a recent paper on book deserts by Susan B. Neuman and Naomi Moland in the journal *Urban Education* (vol. 54, no. 1, p. 126–147) points out, in some areas, decreased funding for libraries has led to "limited hours and curtailed services"—and in many low-income communities, demand has exceeded capacity or parents are often hesitant to check out books because of potential library fines.

In contrast, laundromat literacy initiatives mean "you're able to hold programs at a time and place that really meets people where they are," says LWB Executive Director Adam Echelman. "You have a captive audience, families return weekly, and it's open all the time. Another thing is that most people don't go to a laundromat outside of their neighborhood, so you're working really locally."

Not all laundromat library programs are alike, though most

operate with some type of librarian participation, direction, or materials curation.

Wash Time Is Talk Time, an effort sponsored by TSTF and LCF, distributes posters in English and Spanish that encourage parents to talk, read, and sing with their children while they do laundry; it also provides books to some laundromats to lend out. LWB's Wash and Learn program brings bookshelves with early-learning materials to laundromats, along with small digital servers called KoomBooks, which act as Wi-Fi hotspots that connect users to preloaded educational content. At a Wash and Learn program in Bronx, New York, for instance, content is selected by LWB in partnership with staffers from New York Public Library's Morrisania branch. The University of Arkansas's Laundry

Literacy Program gives laundromats books that children can take home and provides volunteers who read to children onsite. And the Laundromat Library League, a coalition of individuals, religious institutions, and civic organizations—including libraries—puts boxes full of books at more than 40 laundromats in southeastern Pennsylvania and all over the country, encouraging patrons to choose a book to read at the laundromat or at home.

How effective are these programs, and what kind of impact are they having on children's literacy? To find out, LLC is working with Neuman, professor of childhood and literacy education at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. The first part of that evaluation, conducted last year,

found that children in laundromats with literacy resources engaged in 30 times more literacy activities—such as talking with their families, singing songs, drawing, and reading books—than children in laundromats without those resources. The second phase, announced in March, found that including librarians in these programs increased child engagement in literacy-related activities. The results were presented at the second annual LaundryCares Literacy Summit in Chicago.

LWB and the other members of LLC seem confident that these programs will only expand from here. Says Echelman: "Our goal as a coalition is to be working in every laundromat in the country." **AL**

ANNE FORD is *American Libraries* editor-at-large.

scannx® | Scan-to-Translate Services

Scan locally,
Translate globally

scannx.com/translate

american libraries

May 2019

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION



Marshall Breeding's LIBRARY SYSTEMS REPORT

p. 22

NEWSMAKER:

Sandra Cisneros p. 29

2019 Emerging
Leaders p. 36

PLUS: Laundromat Storytimes,
Marketing to Teens, Podcast
for New Parents

RECEIVED
MAY -3 2019
IDAHO COMMISSION FOR LIBRARIES

GRR-RT LOTC-098 MIX COMAIL
1237006 MEM 07/19
0 8P4 AML001 P3 12 552 5689
STACI_C. SHAW
IDAHO COMMISSION FOR LIBRARIES
325 N STATE ST
BOISE ID 83702-6055