Early Learner Program Proposal

Olathe Public Library



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**Background**

As the Olathe Public Library’s (OPL) main branch is the focus of this programming, it is only appropriate to include basic information and facts about the city of Olathe so that the community and population needs can be best understood. The City of Olathe is a large city in Johnson County, Kansas, and has a particularly wealthy and well-educated background. The median income is $77,000, and 94% of adult residents hold high school diplomas, and 44% of adult residents hold Bachelor’s Degrees. The ethnic population is also important to note. As of the 2010 census, the population of Olathe was around 130,000. The ethnic breakdown of this population falls at about 83% white, 10% Hispanic, 5% African American, 2% other ethnicities. (“State & county quickfacts,” 2010). The Hispanic population in particular has grown in recent years, and the trend shows that it will continue to grow at a slow but steady pace. Since this library is in a community with significant need for foreign language services and it also is in a community with a large amount of wealth, the early learner services should cater to a wide variety of patrons with this information in mind.

**Introduction**

There are a lot of aspects that go into the education of early learners, and librarians must do all that they can to meet the needs of these young, developing minds. Today there are many methods of learning and many ways to meet the needs of all types of learners. Libraries have often been considered a place of limited resources (mainly print materials) but by offering new and exciting programs and expanded materials that meet community needs, patrons can be shown what libraries are really about.

America is a melting pot of ethnicities, and this should be taken into account when librarians plan programming for the children in their communities. Found in “Buena Casa, Buena Basa”, a focus on Spanish programming, it states that libraries “strive to mix different ethnic ingredients together harmoniously, so that the new type of American citizen will be well-informed, able to interact cohesively with others, and yet retain an individual cultural identity” (Calderón and Diamant-Cohen, 2009). The authors then go on to question, “How can we attract them [immigrants] to the library in the first place?" (Calderón and Diamant-Cohen, 2009). This question and this need to bring ethnic groups together in a shared community is a particular focus for the modern library, as well as the Olathe Public Library in particular.

As libraries focus on early literacy for any patron, sometimes it is not simply about reading stories and talking to early learners, but incorporating as many activities as possible into their learning regimen. One activity in particular is music. In an article called, “Music, Movement and Early Literacy”, author Hayley Elece McEwing states, “music and singing are crucial in developing phonological and phonemic awareness” (2011). This simple but powerful statement shows that there is significant development made when music is involved in learning. This is another area where the Olathe Public Library could strive to expand.

Lastly, the collections found in a library should *always* focus on the needs of the patrons and the community that the library services. Early-learner collections are no exception. A space and wide selection of materials should be available to preschool children and their caregivers, as such is provided for older children. Early learner areas should be low to the ground and inviting both physically and aesthetically, and should draw the children into a space that is comfortable and accessible to them, allowing for these children to feel included in the library setting.

In an evaluation of the programming of the Olathe Public Library, the conclusion made is that the programming of the library is very extensive, and that there are a lot of different activities offered for children of many different ages. Though the programming is incredibly involved and far-reaching already, there are some areas that can be added and improved upon. This program plan offers three ideas to expand the early learner programs for the Olathe Public library, with the idea of scaling back in some other areas to give the library a much more rounded approach to early learner services and educational offerings. The focus of this plan includes three goals.

1. The expansion of the early-learner collection and a sectioned-off physical space exclusively for early-learners.
2. The inclusion of a bilingual preschool story time.
3. The inclusion of a music-focused toddler and preschool activity.

**Current State of Services**

The OPL currently provides many programs for children of all ages. Programs with a particular focus of early-learners include:

* Preschool story times for 3 to 5 year olds, at various times throughout the week. Story time for 3 year olds are 20-25 minutes, 4-5 year olds are 30-45 minutes. Registration is required, and children attend alone.
* “Time for Two” for two year olds, with a caregiver, once weekly for 20-25 minutes. Registration is required.
* Rhyme Time for 12-24 month old children. These are once weekly, with an adult, for 20-25 minutes.
* “Raising a Reader”, a program focused on “6 by 6” pre-reading literacy skills for ages 5 and younger.
* “Imagination Station”, an activity center within the children’s section that is geared toward preschool-aged children and developing basic concepts such as colors and shapes. (Olathe Public Library, 2010)

The current services also include an extensive children’s collection and children’s DVDs, but a very small collection of materials (both books and multimedia) that meet the needs of early-learners. Most of the services geared toward early-learners and preschool children in the OPL are almost entirely program-based. In a review a early-learner program in a public library in Virginia, the author of the review states, “ Print motivation can be defined as having an interest in and an enjoyment of books . . . children are engaged when parents ask questions and talk about the pictures in board books” (Wright, 2008). This loaded statement that speaks about print motivation explains that it can start at a very young age, and therefore there is no reason why public libraries like the OPL should not have an extensive collection along with a variety of programs for preschool children as they do for the older children.

**Desired State of Services**

In reflecting on the goals stated in the introduction, the desired state of services should include a Spanish story time for preschoolers, a music-centered program, and an expansion of the physical space and collection for early-learners, as further explained in the following.

First, as the Hispanic population of the city of Olathe is significant in comparison to all the other ethnicities, with the exception of the population classified as “White”, it is important for the OPL to include more Spanish programming. Currently there are no specific activities geared to Spanish-speaking families or children, and while the Spanish collections are growing slowly, this is something that needs to be enacted. Adriana Lopez, a magazine editor was quoted Publisher’s Weekly when she spoke of bilingual programming in libraries. Lopez states:

Despite budget cuts and insufficient bilingual staffing, United States libraries continue to invest money expanding Spanish-language children's and YA collections to meet the growing need of their patrons. In 2013, nearly one out of every four children in the U.S. is Hispanic. In 2011, a record 23.9% of pre-k through 12th grade public school students were Hispanic, with similar numbers in public kindergartens and nursery schools (Lopez, 2013).

It is clear that Spanish-speakers will continue to have a great need in local libraries, and implementing a bilingual story time will not only welcome patrons who have been underserved into the library, but it will also provide a learning experience to those children whose parents want them to have experience with different languages and learning. Beginning with one story time a week for children ages 3-5, for 20-25 minutes, could make a huge impact on the community.

Second, the library should include a music-centered program at least twice monthly, for 30 to 45 minutes, if and until there is an increased interest in such a program. Most of the programs currently run by the OPL are very story time or storyteller focused for early-learners. While this is a great method to interact with these very young children, even at such an early age, children interact well with music and learn many things from something set into song. In The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children, a 2009 issue explains succinctly how music can help literacy. It pulls from authors Kantaylieniere Hill-Clarke and Nicole Robinson who state,

Singing and listening to nursery songs, folk songs, and jingles can extend and develop vocabulary and comprehension skills. Learning through music can build listening skills; enhance abstract thinking, improve memory, and encourage the use of compound words, rhymes, and images (Brown, 2009).

The OPL has a few programs in place especially devoted to literacy, and implementing a music program would provide yet another venue that would also promote literacy in a unique way. Libraries within wealthy communities must offer several different programs to bring children into their libraries, because there are often many other ways that caregivers can educate their children. This is a way that will please caregivers of this community as well as engage preschoolers.

Third, an expansion of an early-learner physical space in the library is absolutely necessary. There is very little in the library that meets the needs of early-learners as far as the space and collection. More books geared to very young children need to be purchased and placed prominently on shelves, and in their own space so that caregivers can easily locate them. More educational toys and mats need to be purchased and placed in an area within the children’s department that is exclusively for early-learners, but isn’t completely closed off so that the children still feel as though they are a part of the larger children’s area. Just a few small changes and purchases can make a large difference for these young children, because the library currently has so little that are exclusively for these patrons. Considering the amount of programming for preschool children, it only makes sense that there should be appropriate materials and spaces for them when the do come to the library.

**Marketing and Advocacy**

The best plan of marketing for this program is simply getting as much exposure within the library and around the community. One way would be to have the librarians personally advertise the Spanish story time as well as the music-centered activity at the end of other activities. Flyers would be posted all over the library, and around the community where businesses would allow for the library to advertise. Another huge advertising and marketing tool would be to contact local preschools and daycares and to let them know about the implementation of the new programs and the expansion of the collection and materials. This would be great information for these particular caregivers, because these new programs and the new collection would be geared specifically to the needs of the children they care for.

One fantastic new way to market comes with the online presence that this library has. The OPL has a great, multi-faceted website and obvious virtual know-how, and this tool should be utilized to the fullest extent. Caregivers enrolled in email blasts or text-alert programs can be reached through occasional emails and texts to advertise and to remind them about upcoming activities. After a successful program, photos, with permission, might be posted online so that other caregivers and patrons can see exactly how the library is reaching out in a unique way. After the expansion of the early-learner collection, books and items should be proudly displayed so that patrons are drawn to the new materials.

This is also a great opportunity to get preschools and daycares involved with the activities that happen at the local library. When the librarian makes contact with caregivers it would be wise for the librarian to ask these caregivers what they would like to see in these programs, and if they would like to contribute to a particular program. There could be a spectacular Spanish-speaking storyteller who runs a small daycare that might want to come and actively participate or even lead a story time as a guest storyteller. The more that the community is involved with the growth of these particular programs, the more that they will know that the library wants to meet their needs and to foster learning in early-learners.

**Volunteer Strategy**

It is incredibly important to have active community involvement with the new programming and expanded early-learner collection. Word of mouth is an excellent strategy to get people into the library, and this can be fueled by volunteer efforts within the library. At the beginning of these programs, it is extremely important to get the librarians and staff on board with assisting as much as they willing and able to ensure the success of the new programs. With the music-centered activities, librarians or staff might be asked to contribute what talents they have to create a great activity. Getting a few musicians together in the staff for an instrument activity could make for a successful program. This would require additional time from some staff members, but it would create a well-rounded staff within the library.

Also, at the beginning of each program, it is proposed to bring in two guest performers to set the tone of an exciting program. For the musical program emphasis, a local Kansas musician/storyteller will be invited. Alan Cunningham, from Ottawa, Kansas, has a program with original songs and stores and has been invited to other local libraries as well to perform. It is also proposed that the library work with BeBe Language Academy of Manhattan, Kansas to coordinate a time when a bilingual storyteller can come to the library. The Manhattan public library has had a large amount of success with this unique language academy, and the OPL would benefit from their knowledge and experience.

It is also proposed that the children’s staff take part in several library trainings (mostly online) to further these programs with bilingual and musical efforts. The success of these programs does not require extensive know-how or even in-depth language or musical knowledge, just the appropriate connections with the right employees or people within the community.

**Budget**

Expected costs for this program plan are as follows:

1. Expanded collection and physical space upgrade:
   1. 1st year, $2,500.00 ($1,000 for books and materials, $1,500 for physical space materials)
   2. 2nd and subsequent years, $1,000 for material replacement and new materials.
2. Bilingual story time program:
   1. 1st activity, $500 plus mileage to bring in the BeBe Language Academy.
   2. 2nd and subsequent activities, $500 for the year.
3. Music-centered programming:
   1. 1st activity, $150 plus mileage to bring in Alan Cunninham.
   2. 2nd and subsequent activities, $1,000 for the first year to include musical materials. $500 per year thereafter for materials replacement.
4. Staff training
   1. $1,200 allotted for initial training, as necessary, including staff workshops.
   2. Subsequent years, $500 a year for staff workshops and additional training.

The actual OPL 2013 budget and projected 2014 budget are attached as Appendix A for reference about the overall budget that would realistically allow for the expansion of the collection and the new programming.

**Evaluation Methods**

The evaluations for these proposed programs are twofold. One, it is necessary for the librarians and staff to evaluate the success and effectiveness of the expanded collection and new early-learner programming. Two, it is necessary for the caregivers and preschool patrons to evaluate the effectiveness of the expansion and the programming. It is proposed that these evaluations are completed in two ways:

1. Surveys completed anonymously by the library staff and library patrons.
2. Information gathered about actual attendance and library use.

Surveys carefully crafted for both the staff and the patrons will be handed out after the first several activities and during the first few months after the expanded collection is in place. The patrons will receive a small incentive to complete the survey and to give it to the staff to evaluate. The staff will be expected to complete the surveys so that the library programming can be evaluated carefully by invested employees and community members. After half a year has passed, surveys will be conducted again so that a comparison study can be made about the progress of the programming and the collection. Numbers will be recorded about patron involvement in each of the programs for every activity, and circulation statistics will be gathered concerning the expanded collection as well as numbers recorded daily concerning the use of the early-learner physical space. Between the surveys and usage numbers and information, it will be fairly obvious if these program changes are successful or if they need to be re-examined for improvement.

**Conclusion**

After carefully looking at the community for the OPL and the extensive funding offered, the proposed programming and collection expansion would go a long way to meeting the needs of early-learners and their caregivers. As mentioned in a 2003 article in the Library Journal, it concisely states, “by offering unique programs and products and by getting the word out to the public, librarians can expand their Users' understanding of what today's libraries are all about” (Mazmanian, 2003). Ultimately, meeting patron and community needs through these changes will do just that.

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