

LSTA Grant Evaluation

Extending Library Service to the Unserved Grant Program
Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) FFY2012

Project title: Come to the Library: Serving Unserved Families in the St. Helens School District

Grantees: St. Helens Public Library (Columbia County)

Evaluator: Barbara Thompson, retired Public Services Manager, Springfield Public Library

Date of Site Visit: May 8, 2013

Summary of Evaluation

The primary goal of the St Helens Library's three-year LSTA grant project is to provide library services for the unserved families who reside outside the city limits, but within the St. Helens school district, by offering them free library cards, and by improving library service. The St. Helens Public Library is funded by city property taxes. Families residing outside the city limits must pay for library service. The annual fee is a reasonable \$40, but this is expensive for an economically depressed community. In addition, in an unpopular move years ago, the fee was raised to \$115 annually. Although the high fee is long gone, the community mistrust remains.

The library's regular budget is inadequate to provide full time employment for the youth librarian, Nathan Jones, which affects his ability to develop the youth collection, build community partnerships, provide outreach, and be present in the library for programming and reader's advisory. The library's materials budget is inadequate to keep the youth collection fresh and up to date.

By the third quarter of the first year of this three-year grant program, Margaret Jeffries, Director, and Nathan Jones, Youth Librarian and LSTA Project Manager, have created much of the infrastructure to greatly improve the library now and into the future. Because the grant supports additional staff time for the youth librarian and library assistants, staff has made notable achievements: updating the youth collection through strategic weeding and purchases, creating booklists and brochures, producing high quality youth programs, building new partnerships with the schools and other stakeholders, and planning the beginnings of a major outreach effort to promote Summer Reading.

Despite these achievements, staff are disappointed that fewer than the expected number of families have applied for free cards. Nathan and Margaret have reviewed strategies, consulted with the State Library and altered some methods. With the State Library's approval, they recently opened the program to families who are within the school district with children ages 0-18, who are not enrolled in the public schools, but attend private or out-of-district schools, are home schooled, or are not in school yet. They also plan to extend the free card offer to two years, instead of the original offer of one year.

There are several reasons that more families have not taken advantage of the free card offer: the grant focus may have been too narrow; the steps to getting a card numerous and cumbersome; the targeted population may not have heard about the program or understand what it can offer; or, even if everything is done right, changes may simply take longer than expected. Staff hopes to see more progress in the next cycle of the grant, and is open to ideas for change within grant parameters.

Project Objectives

The primary goal of the project is to extend the programs, collections and services to unserved households with children ages 0-18 who attend, could attend or will attend the St. Helens public schools.

Secondary goals of the project are to:

- Establish and solidify partnerships with the schools, especially library media specialists;
- Dispel misunderstandings in the community about the cost of library services to non-residents;
- Begin the process of preparing the community for a future library district.

Project Methods

The library's primary method is to offer free library cards to eligible unserved families. Staff has marketed the project energetically, relying on unpaid advertising opportunities. They have distributed flyers throughout the community and to every elementary student and Head Start class, posted information on the City's social media sites and newsletters, sent press releases to local newspapers, and shared information at the many community and library events the youth librarian and director have attended.

By the third quarter, after they changed the eligibility requirements, they emailed every home school family within the school district and met with Boy Scout, Girl Scout and 4-H Club leadership.

Staff has worked on updating and expanding the youth collection. They have completed weeding and have stored important but non-circulating material. Nathan has used about half of the grant materials budget, with emphasis on improving youth reference, nonfiction and high interest fiction. Library staff has created library resource brochures, print booklists and on-line pathfinders, targeting preschool through young adult.

Staff has met their LSTA goal for the number of programs, events and activities produced. Examples are Ninja Night, teen movies, self-defense for girls, a puppet show, paracord craft for teens, and a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)-based program called "Rocket Cars", designed to explore the power of thrust.

Staff took programs to the schools, increasing Nathan's access to students and strengthened connections with teachers and school library staff.

Staff has begun planning for grant-funded outreach to increase Summer Reading participation. Nathan has arranged to visit a "kindergarten round up" for children and parents, classrooms at two local elementary schools, a charter school, and hopes to make additional visits. Staff expects that the outreach will promote both Summer Reading and the grant project, and that increased summer participation will lead to increased grant participation.

The staff is tracking grant progress and successes. The first quarter gave them the chance to set up their tracking mechanisms and try different strategies.

Secondary goals of the project include creating partnerships with each school, working to dispel community misunderstandings, and beginning the process of preparing the community for a possible future library district. Staff hopes to achieve these benefits as extensions of the primary goal of attracting new patrons with free cards, collection improvements, programming and outreach. Their new partnerships with the schools are flourishing. Nathan and Margaret use their visits to schools, city council, the chamber of commerce and service clubs to promote library services and work on dispelling myths about the cost of library service.

Project Results

At this point, 60-plus out of 752 eligible district families have taken advantage of the opportunity to get library cards. This is fewer than Nathan and Margaret had projected. The library's expansion of eligibility and other changes should increase participation in the future.

The youth collection is greatly improved. Nathan supervised a systematic collection weeding, storage of rarely circulating books, and has expended half of the grant material budget on new titles, specifically reference, non-fiction, and high interest books.

Staff has created roughly half of the projected number of on-line and print pathfinders and brochures, including "Biographies of Presidents", "LEGO Books", "If You Liked Twilight", "Kick-Butt Heroines", "Steampunk" and "If you liked Diary of a Wimpy Kid".

The library has produced thirteen grant-supported programs, which is 100% of their proposal. With lessons learned about timing and promotion they plan to continue producing programs though the rest of the grant period. In addition to high quality in-house programming, Nathan has taken some remarkable programs to the schools. He partnered with a middle school science teacher with no budget, to provide material and equipment from the library's regular budget, for an after-school comparative anatomy class. Later, the students led a grant funded library program about animal anatomy.

Nathan was also invited by a media specialist to teach a lesson to an elementary class, and he chose, in line with their Common Core standards, a lesson about the sugar content of soda.

The library worked during the first grant quarter to establish tracking and statistical methods used to determine success. Their quarterly Activity Reports indicate that their methods are working as expected.

Project Impact

The library is serving families who have not had access to the library. They are creating mutually beneficial community partnerships and solidifying support for the library. Staff is bringing library programs to the schools. They have made real improvements to the youth collection, and to providing high quality programming. This reviewer saw a room full of children enjoying a spectacular LEGO program.

Because the grant provides .3 FTE toward the youth librarian's position, the library and community benefit. He has been able to direct the production of booklists, manage collection development, provide reader's advisory, develop working relations with schools and other agencies, provide more programming, accept invitations to bring programs to the schools, and plan future outreach.

The staff is making best practice improvements that will continue to pay off. The improved youth non-fiction and reference collections will support the schools' Common Core and STEM requirements. They have plans in place for new outreach to promote a bigger and better Summer Reading program. They will extend story times throughout the summer and offer a Read to Dogs program. They are developing new community partnerships. Next year, they will emphasize teen involvement with the creation of a Teen Advisory Board, an increased graphic novel collection, increased teen programming, updated teen music collection, and targeted teen volunteer recruitment. The addition of grant-funded Freegal music service and family gaming nights should attract teens and their families.

They have anecdotal evidence that the grant has a positive impact on their new patrons, who are becoming frequent users, attending both grant-funded and regular programs, and checking out a lot of books. One mother shared that she is using the card for herself, in addition to her children, something she did not expect to do.

Upcoming grant activities should increase the grant's success. In addition to new teen involvement, staff plans to alter the marketing strategy. Despite a considerable marketing effort, patrons report hearing about the free cards through word of mouth, while others appear to have not heard about it at all. Staff will buy ads that will run at the local movie theater, appear on the Chamber of Commerce reader board and in local newspapers.

Suggestions for Improvement

Nathan and Margaret have given considerable thought to what has worked well and what should be changed. They have identified lessons learned, such as:

- Realizing there are times and days that work better for the community to attend programs.
- Learning that programs need three weeks of promotion to garner an audience.
- Front load the collection purchases, instead of ordering incrementally throughout the grant cycle.
- Offering the free card for two years instead of one.
- Increasing the population that is eligible to apply to include all families with children 0-18.

Below are more suggestions.

Remove barriers and streamline the process

The process devised for families to get cards was designed to address school concerns about confidentiality and the library's determination to do due diligence so that only eligible families could take advantage of the program. As a result, the process is complex, requiring families to take several steps to get cards. The library sends flyers to the schools, where they are distributed to students, who, with any luck, take them home, where the family gets the information, then goes to the school, gets a proof of eligibility form, and takes it to the library. These may be too many steps for families who may not understand the process, or just give up. Are there ways to simplify the process? Could the library distribute application forms instead of information forms, and skip the eligibility step? (Then keep statistics on the number of applications distributed.) Perhaps the library could use personal identification as proof of eligibility, taking the applicant's word for having children in the home. Could the library make cards off-site at school and community events?

Simplify the message

Flyers and ads need to be short, snappy sound bites. Full information and rules can be posted on the website or be a separate flyer.

Be inclusive

Is it possible to open the program to all residents who live outside the city limits but inside the school boundaries? This would give childless households an opportunity to participate and experience library service.

Offer incentives

Could the library offer fun incentives, such as a free books or a chance to win great prizes for family members who come in for cards? Could the school that gets the most card applicants win something fun?

Consider creative ways to get students to the library.

Although the library is able to bring great programs to the schools, this does not get students to the library. The library is somewhat isolated geographically, and the schools have no budget for transportation, so could the grant provide vouchers for bus transportation to bring classes in for special programs or library tours? If students come to the library, can staff devise a simple system to issue library cards on the spot?

Program for Success

Target programming for groups that can bring children to the library, such as scouts, home schoolers and 4-H clubs. Perhaps the library could build on their successful babysitting program that already attracts girl scouts, offering other badge-earning programs. Offer meeting space and library tours to these groups and issue cards on the spot.

Change takes time

Over the next two years, the library will surely see more response from the community for the free card offer, but it may take longer than three years to reach the goal. Is it possible to extend the grant?

Count Your Success

The library has already seen considerable success with collection development, community partnerships and high quality programs. A small number of enthusiastic new library members may become the support base that will help with the long-term goal of creating a library district, and having library service will certainly makes a difference for those families now.