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Ready2Learn Five Years Later

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Abstract

In July of 2013, the first Ready2Learn library card was issued in Eastern Oregon. At the time, Project Ready2Learn had the support of the Library Services and Technology Act, Governor Kitzhaber, Oregon College Savings Plan (OCSP), Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. (GOBHI) and a committed team of librarians ready to prove that frequent library use is directly connected to success in school. Fast forward to today and what you have left is GOBHI, the librarians, and some pretty compelling evidence that what we are doing is working.

On paper, the purpose of Ready2Learn was to increase kindergarten readiness. However, the program had a larger goal: to demonstrate that the services *already* being provided in libraries for children ages 0–6 were giving kids a leg up when they entered kindergarten.

This article provides an overview of the program from its launch in 2013 to its evolution in 2016. As a longtime member of the Ready2Learn coalition, I will outline the struggles and successes of the program, concluding with the results of the Kindergarten Assessment conducted this fall.

The Original Plan

When Ready2Learn launched in 2013, it served libraries in five eastern Oregon counties: Union, Wallowa, Baker, Umatilla, and Grant. The program was an ideal pilot for these areas where lower economic status and remote location make access to early education resources challenging.

Funded by a three-year Library Services and Technology grant (LSTA), Ready2Learn employed a paid staff of three. A Program Coordinator, tasked with managing the grant and two Outreach Field Workers. The Outreach Field Work-



ers became the face of the program in libraries. They delivered special story times, attended events in the community to spread the word, and interfaced with library staff about program changes.

Additional service was to be provided in-kind by library staff. The circulation team at each library was responsible for selling the program at the front desk and tracking event attendance by Ready2Learn card holders. Children's librarians and support staff were responsible for distributing the Ready2Learn newsletter, crafting story times that revolved around the monthly Ready2Learn theme and communicating to parents the importance of the program.

The LSTA grant specified that at a minimum the program provide the following: early literacy training for library staff, a monthly newsletter for parents in both English and Spanish, and a two-cent credit toward Oregon College Savings Plan accounts for every book checked out or program attended by a participating child.

Oregon College Savings Plan (OCSP) is a state-sponsored 529 savings plan that helps families save for college. OCSP was a natural partner for Ready2Learn because they had been supporting summer reading programs in libraries throughout the state of Oregon for the better part of ten years.

The final portion of the original LSTA grant was to evaluate the program by comparing Oregon Kindergarten Assessment scores of Ready2Learn participants with those who did not participate in the program.



Photo Credit: Jennifer Costley.



Roadblocks

Almost immediately, problems arose. To open an Oregon College Savings Plan account, R2L participants needed to put down a \$25 deposit. At two cents per checkout, a child would have to check-out 1,250 books before meeting the threshold to open an account. Parents of children who already had OCSP accounts were able to deposit program credits from the start, but those who would potentially be opening their first college savings account were left frustrated by the deposit element and the complicated paperwork. Did they really want to fill out that packet for a credit of a few dollars at a time? Most parents never opened an account.

In addition to problems with the OCSP accounts, the Kindergarten Assessment became far harder to achieve than the original grant writer envisioned. Although Ready2Learn was partnered with the Intermountain Education Service District (IMESD), Ready2Learn was not able to access student ID numbers, which were needed to pull students' scores out from those of their peers.

Compromise

As Ready2Learn worked its way through three years of LSTA funding, compromises were made to ensure that the program's original goals were met regardless of the roadblocks along the way.

Ready2Learn field staff provided early literacy training to library staff, trained front desk staff on how to talk up the program, produced bilingual newsletters and visited the libraries regularly to interact with program participants.

The program sent OCSP representatives to the libraries to show parents how to open a college savings account. OCSP also solved the \$25 deposit problem by doing away with the two-cent checkout incentive and instead offering three, \$1,000 scholarships per month. This measure incentivized library use and increased the number of parents who went the extra mile to set up an account.

In addition to LSTA and OCSP, Ready2Learn received funding from Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. (GOBHI) whose mission is better care, better health and lower costs for rural Oregonians. GOBHI funds were used to provide monthly educational gift packs as an additional library use incentive. Ten gift packs were distributed each month, each featuring tools necessary to develop early literacy skills at home.

During the three years of LSTA funding, Ready2Learn grew enrollment, increased library use and helped prepare children for kindergarten. What the program was not able to do, however, was demonstrate its impact in a measurable way. Although The Intermountain Education Service District worked with Ready2Learn to compare Ready2Learn kindergarten assessment scores with those of students in Head Start, this was not an effective measure of the program. Very few Ready2Learn participants were enrolled in Head Start, and those that were had the advantage of being in a preschool program. We wanted to show that libraries were helping level the playing field for those not enrolled in preschool. Assessing solely Head Start students could not give us that result.

Changes

In 2016, LSTA funds ran out, and with them went the paid staff. The program could have died at this point; instead, it transitioned into a library-managed program thanks to the



in-kind services offered by librarians. Project Ready2Learn is currently co-chaired by myself and Milton-Freewater Public Library director Erin Wells. Together we have written grants to secure funding for years four and five, brought six new libraries into the program, and most notably, with the aid of the Pendleton, Hermiston and La Grande School Districts, conducted an evaluation of the program.

The transition from LSTA funding and staffing to in-kind program facilitation was a challenge. Library staff had to be willing to think outside the lines of the original grant and determine what the program would look like without partners like OCSP, LSTA and the Intermountain Education Service District.

At our final LSTA-funded meeting in 2016, a representative of each participating library agreed to continue working to ensure this program would not disappear with the funding. Those present at that meeting remain involved today.

Results

In September of 2017, thanks to financial support from The Wildhorse Foundation and the Oregon Community Foundation, Ready2Learn students from the program's three largest school districts participated in the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment. These children's scores were pulled out from those of their peers, batched, and averaged. Students were evalu-

ated on uppercase letter knowledge, lowercase letter knowledge, and letter sounds.

A full report conducted by NPC Research will be released in the next couple of months; however, initial data shows that Ready2Learn students averaged significantly higher scores than their peers in all three categories, drawing a clear line between library use and kindergarten readiness.

Conclusion

It has been five years since Ready2Learn began. What started as a program with six participating libraries has grown to twenty-nine.

Today, more than 3,500 kids in five counties have Ready2Learn cards. Although some original partners such as OCSP have had to leave the program, GOBHI has continued to offer financial support and is now joined by the Oregon Community Foundation.

In 2018 Ready2Learn will provide "stay and plays" to participating

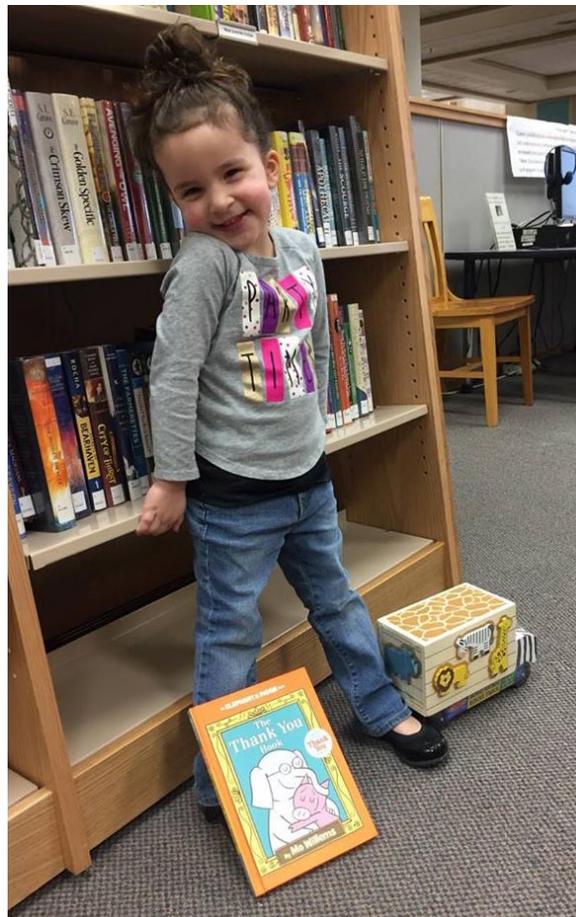


Photo Credit: Jennifer Costley.



libraries. These toys, costumes, and other resources are aimed at increasing the amount of time a child spends in the library. Ready2Learn will also send an early literacy education performer to multiple libraries and provide a spring training for staff.

We don't know what Ready2Learn will look like in another five years. What we do know is that it has made an impact in rural Oregon. It is my belief that as long as the librarians in the program remain dedicated to seeing it succeed, Ready2Learn will continue to grow, improve, and produce results. 

