Libraries serve as community catalysts to build pre-literacy skills

Local community leaders in Marathon County, Wisconsin, were stumped.

They had recently attended an event designed to share information about the long-term effects of early childhood on the success of communities. They learned that investing in early childhood education delivers a 13 percent return on investment, and that early interventions can have lasting benefits through adulthood.

But what to do about it?

"We were uptaking all this information about early childhood and its importance, and it's so big and multi-faceted that people were spinning their wheels. The community seemed overwhelmed," Dr. Corrie Norrbom, Health Policy Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service said.

When Dr. Norrbom heard about LENA Start, a 13-week program for parents which helps to increase interactive talk at home, she realized it would offer a starting point for the community to begin to tackle the problem.

"LENA seemed like a good solution because it was tangible and evidence-based, and we would be able to get data sooner than 20 years from now," Dr. Norrbom said.

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After conducting focus groups with business and community stakeholders, she found widespread enthusiasm for the idea. A public-private partnership began to form to support a local LENA Start implementation.

But one question remained: where would the program live?

"Not your grandmother's library"

The answer came from an enterprising county administrator who recognized that LENA Start fit perfectly with the mission of the local public library, which is to connect people with information, ideas, and community. Under the guidance of Library Director Ralph Illick, who spearheaded the project and generated support, the library became the hub of the LENA Start program in Marathon County, which now hosts classes in four locations.

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Using LENA technology, caregivers can see how well they're putting into practice the early literacy strategies that the library encourages.

"We want every child to be able to read and be literate. We emphasize early literacy skills by educating parents on five practices — talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing," Taylor Weinfurter, Children's Librarian at the Marathon County Public Library, said. "LENA fits in with our mission, because it emphasizes talk and parent education, which are some of our goals in the children's department."

Building community for young families

The goals are similar at the Springfield City Library in Massachusetts, where LENA Start was launched as a key component of the local early literacy coalition's efforts to get students reading at grade level by fourth grade.

"We consider ourselves to be a progressive, future-looking library system. We're incredibly driven by connections and collaborations with others in the city to get things done," Jean Canosa Albano, Assistant Director for Public Services at the Springfield City Library, said. "We want to move the needle so children can be more prepared to read and write when they get to school, but we also know this can really make an impact on the families' lives."

Her team has reached out to young, first-time parents in particular, to help them learn how to interact with their new babies and build connections with other parents.

"We've found that to be a really beautiful and motivating part of the program, when caregivers start caring for each other, sharing tips, and successes, and frustrations, and building each other up," Canosa Albano said.

Families celebrate graduating from the LENA Start program at Springfield City Library.

At the Ames Public Library in Iowa, program coordinator Craig Van Pay has also seen LENA Start serve as a catalyst for community-building.

"What I love about having the class at the library is that we create a habit of going to the library in these families," he said. "When we talk to families in focus groups, they say that they used to come to library maybe once a month or less. After LENA Start, they're starting to come every week. I know a lot of them stay connected after the class — they make friendships and support groups."

As the word about the program has spread locally, more and more parents have enrolled in the class, with about 200 families graduating from the LENA Start program in Ames to date.

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"The census says that about 2,500 children were born in Story County since we started LENA Start. So, to think that we're providing services to about 1 in 15 kids in our community is really amazing," Van Pay said.

Changing the trajectory of long-term literacy outcomes

Data show that program participants have increased the amount of adult words and conversational turns that children experience and their own knowledge of child development. Children's developmental scores are growing twice as fast as expected.

"We want to affect a lasting change in the children's ability. We want to help families continue the types of things are going to set their children for for future success — not just talking more, but using more elaborate speech, interacting more, spending more time with them, and doing more things that are known to be beneficial to their development like going to the library," Van Pay said.

Learn more about LENA Start!

LENA Start is a program for parents that uses regular feedback from LENA technology to help increase interactive talk in order to close the early-talk gap, support kindergarten readiness, and build stronger families.

Visit www.lena.org for more information.