

Improving Access to Books for Young School-age Children One Library at a Time

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Keywords: *school libraries, policies*

Citation: Baily-White, S. and Stewart, R. A. (2016). Improving Access to Books for Young School-age Childern One Library at a Time. *PNLA Quarterly*, 80(3).

Abstract

Johnson and Donham (2012) found that Iowa elementary school library check out policies for young children did not always support early literacy development because of their being overly restrictive concerning the number of books children could borrow each week. A state-wide survey of Idaho elementary school library staff revealed similar challenges. Preschoolers, kindergarteners, and 1st graders were not being given adequate access to books. A state-wide grant program was developed and implemented that provided funds for collection development while stipulating the implementation of less restrictive check out policies for young children. Results from the grant program are reported along with future plans and recommendations for others wanting to implement similar programs.

Introduction

We had a hunch based on anecdotal evidence that young children attending public elementary schools in Idaho were experiencing limited access to books because of overly restrictive school library check out policies specifically targeted at this age group of students. Thus we set about to explore the validity of our hunch. To do so we surveyed all Idaho elementary school library staff about their check out policies and practices concerning preschoolers, kindergarteners, and 1st graders. Our survey was a precursor to and provided a rationale for a subsequent grant program focused on helping elementary school libraries augment their collections for young children while also implementing less restrictive check out policies. The remainder of this report provides additional information about our efforts.

Interestingly, about the time we began our work, Johnson and Donham (2012) were concluding and writing-up for publication a similar study to ours. They surveyed 75 Iowa public elementary school librarians representing 92 schools and 32 districts about kindergarten circulation policies and practices. Of the 42 librarians who responded, 71% reported kindergarteners only being allowed to check out one book per visit at the beginning of the school year. Although daily visits in 11 schools and flexible visits in 13 schools partially compensated for this, four of the 42 libraries only allowed two visits each week and 11 allowed only one. Johnson and Donham state, "Of greatest concern were those students who came to their library once or twice a week and were limited to one book per visit. These children, representing 43 percent of responding schools, had the opportunity to borrow—at most—two books per week" (p.9). Only 36% said they raised the borrowing limits for kindergarteners as the year progressed. When these results are taken in aggregate, it is clear that in a significant portion of these libraries access to books by kindergarteners was severely restricted. This is not a positive finding for early literacy advocates, nor a positive finding concerning the important role that school libraries should play in helping children develop their early literacy skills, habits, and attitudes. Our results directly parallel those of Johnson and Donham, and the remainder of this report provides more detail about them and also describes a subsequent grant program that began addressing the challenges that were found to exist in Idaho.



Early Literacy and Elementary School Libraries in Idaho

In 1999 the State of Idaho passed the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act (ICLA) that focused on improving children's literacy in kindergarten through 3rd grade. The act required additional early literacy training for all inservice and newly certified elementary teachers. The cornerstone of the act, however, was implementation of a state-wide early literacy screener called the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI). All kindergarten through 3rd grade students were required to take the screener at least twice each school year. Since its inception, the IRI has significantly influenced primary grade literacy curricula and instruction, and although the IRI and the ICLA have not achieved all of their intended outcomes, they should be seen as positive and forwarding thinking steps for early literacy education in Idaho.

Although some growth has occurred in IRI scores during the intervening years, dramatic growth has eluded the state. This is corroborated by Idaho's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for reading at the 4th grade level where average scale scores and percentages of students at the three performance levels (i.e., basic, proficient, and advanced) have remained relatively stable since the 1990's (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). One possible shortcoming of the ICLA was that it did not focus enough on increasing the amount of reading young children do. The act did not, for example, increase funding for school libraries to improve and enhance collections and it did not systematically increase access to books for young children. Interestingly, Idaho had another opportunity in the mid-2000's to address such shortcomings when the state rewrote its content standards. At that time, Idaho 4th graders performed less well on the NAEP on nonfiction reading when compared to performance on fiction, so as the standards were revised more emphasis was placed on primary grade nonfiction (Stoneberg, 2009). Regrettably, however, when the revised standards were approved, no additional resources were included for enhancing curricular materials, library collections, or providing additional relevant teacher professional development to reflect the increased emphasis on nonfiction.

Further complicating matters, Idaho does not require elementary school librarians to be certified teachers nor librarians. Thus, most Idaho public elementary school libraries are staffed by paraprofessionals, most of whom have limited training in library sciences. These paraprofessionals also oftentimes have other assigned duties in the school thus making their work in libraries less than full time. Additionally, elementary school library budgets are seldom if ever at recommended per pupil levels and were essentially decimated during the "Great Recession" beginning in 2008. For example, state-wide data reveal that 28% of elementary school libraries in Idaho receive \$100 or less per year for book purchases and 44% receive \$500 or less. Granted, Idaho is a rural state with many small elementary schools but even with small enrollments these funding amounts are woefully inadequate. Some schools in Idaho have not been able to purchase books for their libraries for some years. Given all of the above, the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) decided to explore what might be done to address these issues. This paper reports the results of some initial efforts. The ICfL is an agency located in the Executive Branch of Idaho state government. Its mission is to assist "libraries to build the capacity to better serve their clientele" (<http://www.libraries.idaho.gov/landing/about-us>).

State-wide Survey of Elementary School Libraries

We first administered to all elementary library staff a survey targeted at check out policies for young children (see Appendix A for the survey). Several other topics were explored in the survey including library staff experience and library funding. The survey was sent to all of the approximately 375 elementary schools in Idaho. Two hundred forty-seven valid surveys were returned: a 66% response rate.

Specifically, the survey asked about check out policies and practices for preschool, kindergarten, and 1st grade children. Idaho does not publically fund preschools but the state still has a number of such programs funded by federal dollars. Respondents were asked how many books per week children at the various grade levels were allowed to check out both fall and spring semesters.

Table 1

Percentage of Respondents at Each Level of Book Checkout by Grade and Semester

Number of Books	Pre Fall (n=107)	Pre Spring (n=104)	K Fall (n=243)	K Spring (n=245)	1 st Fall (n=247)	1 st Spring (n=246)
0	74	75	29	16	2	2
1	13	13	47	55	48	37
2	3	3	10	15	30	38
3-5	0	0	5	5	7	9
>5	1	0	3	4	9	10
Don't know	9	9	6	5	4	4

Results revealed that if a child is in a preschool program, the likelihood of their being allowed to check out books from the school library is very low. Only about 16% of preschoolers can check out one or two books per week during the school year. Nearly three quarters of preschoolers can not check out books any time during the school year. In kindergarten, 29% can not check out books during the fall semester and 16% can not during the spring semester. About one half of kindergarteners can check out one book per week during the school year, and about 20% of kindergarteners can check out two or more books per week during the school year. This is definitely an improvement over the preschool level, but when you put it into the context of what adequate access for kindergarten children should be, the check out policies are still not supportive of early literacy. Most all 1st graders can check out one or more books from the beginning of the school year, but only 16-19% can check out more than two. Again, first graders need continual access to many books and this goal is not being achieved in most Idaho elementary school libraries (Krashen, 2004, 2007; Neuman, 2001).

Questions were also asked about library staff experience and library funding. Results showed that libraries, for the most part, have experienced staff. When asked about years of experience in their current position, 22% had 6-10 years of experience and 33% had greater than 10 years. This was a positive finding since it had been hypothesized that library positions might experience high turnover since the jobs are almost always low on the wage scale. But such was not the case. Instead, there is a significant degree of stability and experience in elementary school libraries, and we believe this is an excellent and important foundation upon which to build future work since well-trained, experienced librarians have been shown to positively impact student achievement (Lance & Hofschire, 2012).

We also asked about formal training received since the library staff assumed their current positions. Thirty-six percent reported receiving no training, but 21% had taken formal library courses, 10% WebJunction courses, and 11% ICfL Alternative Basic Library Education (ABLE)/Supplemental Alternative Basic Library Education (SABLE) courses. WebJunction is a program of OCLC research and provides professional development to the library community. ABLE/SABLE courses were developed by the Idaho Commission for Libraries and provide basic library knowledge and skills for staff with no formal training in library science. Although over a third of respondents had not received training, we had hypothesized that the number would be even greater so the results were again seen as a positive foundation upon which to build.

Idaho public school per pupil expenditure is one of the lowest in the nation so library budgets are an ongoing concern. Respondents were asked "What is the total dollar amount of your book budget from your school this year?" A dollar range was to be checked. These findings were not as positive but were not unexpected. Twenty-eight percent checked 0-100 dollars, 16% 200-500 dollars, 19% 600-1,000 dollars, and 30% 1,000-5,000 dollars. Only two respondents, less than 1%, checked over \$5,000, and 7% said they didn't know. Granted, Idaho is a rural state with a number of small elementary schools, but having so many schools report such low amounts underscores the significance of the problem. Nearly two thirds of all elementary libraries received \$1,000 or less for the year.

In summary, survey results revealed deficits in library services being offered young children at school in Idaho. Although staff at the ICfL had been aware of these problems, the survey provided much needed empirical evidence that served as the basis for planning and funding acquisition. Based on student and library needs identified in the survey, ICfL staff developed and then acquired state funding for a new program called *School Library Access Grants*. We now turn to a discussion of it.

School Library Access Grants

Initially, the ICfL acquired \$100,000 of state funding for 20 elementary school libraries to purchase books. Awards ranged from \$1,000 to \$5,000. Applications were sent to all elementary schools in Idaho. Primary stipulations were that all funds be spent on age-appropriate fiction and nonfiction for kindergarten-2nd grade students. If the school had a preschool program, then that group also had to be included. Additional stipulations were at least 40% of the funds had to be expended on age-appropriate nonfiction and all preK-1st grade students be allowed to check out at least two books per week from the beginning of the school year. Recipients also agreed to complete midterm and final reports/evaluations of the program. The program has been running for five years and 186 libraries have participated.

The program has been quite successful. Library staff, teachers, principals, and parents have been highly enthusiastic about having increased access to high-quality, age-appropriate fiction and nonfiction. Library staff report increased circulation. Teachers report students being enthusiastic about going to the library and being able to check out books. And both teachers and library staff report that it has been a positive change to have preschoolers check out books. The nonfiction has been especially popular with library staff, teachers, and children since collections were particularly weak in this area. Overall, respondents articulate many successes and positives about the program and few challenges.

At the conclusion of the first year of grants, a survey was sent home to preK-1 parents. Over 600 completed surveys were returned which represented a 45% response rate. Some of the questions asked about changes in home literacy behaviors. Seventy-one percent of respondents said that as a result of receiving books from the school library they spent more time reading with their child. Only 1% said no to this question and the remaining 28% responded that they already did this regularly before the school year so there had been no change in behavior. Similar results occurred when parents were asked if they spent more time talking with their child about the books they read to them as a consequence of getting books from the school library. Seventy-three percent said yes, 4% no, and the remaining responded that they already did this regularly before the school year. These are positive findings showing that increased access to books resulted in increased reading and discussion at home.

Library staff submitted midterm and end-of-year reports. These contained many positive outcomes but only a few will be explored here. First, there were limited problems with increased lost or damaged books. A few libraries reported problems, but most did not. Given the limited resources provided elementary school libraries in Idaho, it is understandable that the issue of lost and damaged books was a salient concern of library staff and teachers before the grants

started. So when the problem did not arise in most locations, library staff and teachers were pleasantly surprised, adding to the enthusiasm about the grants. Second, some teachers at the outset of the grants expressed reluctance to participate because of loss and damage concerns, concerns about increased workloads associated with monitoring the books and children, or concerns about taking time away from instructional routines to attend the library. But most changed their minds as the school year progressed. Change occurred because of superb diplomacy by library staff, pressure from principals, or seeing the children become excited about the library and books.

Interestingly, not many but some parents manifested the same reluctance as teachers. They did not want their child bringing home books or at least not more than one because of the fear of loss or damage and the possibility of costs associated with the books. Keisa Williams (2013), an elementary librarian in California, reported similar experiences when she took a risk and radically changed her kindergarten check-out policies. She went from allowing four books per month to be checked out to over 40. As a consequence, she had "several families who would not allow students to take home books from the library for fear of their child losing books" (p. 17) and she had other families who were reluctant to have their child bring home so many books for the same reason. Most of our families, however, changed over time. It was a variety of things that caused the change. Teachers talked at parent-teacher conferences about the importance of the program, parents experienced their child coming home excited about the new books, or other parents talked positively about the program and the reluctant parents were swayed to give it a try.

And finally, changing check out policies represented a significant cultural shift at some schools (Williams, 2013). Parents and teachers believed that the changes would release a wave of problems stemming mostly from concerns about young children lacking the maturity and thus the responsibility to take care of and keep track of books. Of course, the library staff who submitted their grant applications did not share these concerns, but recall that elementary library staff in Idaho are not certificated, so power differentials between them and teachers can be quite pronounced. Power differentials between certified librarians and classroom teachers have been previously reported and discussed in the literature (e.g., Kimmel, 2011; Wallace & Husid, 2012). For example, Kimmel (2011) found through discourse analysis that elementary school teachers positioned a school librarian in stereotypical ways such as "a helper, a story lady whispering "shhhh," and a specialist providing release time for teachers" (p. 12). Kimmel asserts that librarians "have much more work to do (and noise to make) to gain recognition for "real school librarians"" as defined in recent professional literature (p. 12). Thus, the grants served in a number of cases to empower library staff, and for that matter principals also, to make changes in check out policies, the need for which had been recognized for some time.

The *School Library Access Grants* are for one year so after the first year of implementation, we decided it was important to assess the degree to which recipients retained the two books per week minimum requirement. If libraries immediately reverted back to their former policies, the grants would have provided much needed new books but the program would have failed at its primary goal of changing borrowing policies. To find out we surveyed all of the first year recipients during the spring of the following academic year. Seventeen of 20 grant recipients returned surveys and all said that they had retained the policies. Many expressed appreciation for the grants having had this stipulation since for some time they had wanted to increase access for young children in their schools but did not know how to go about accomplishing it given the poor condition of collections and the long history of restrictive check out policies. For others, the call for grant applications to be submitted had stimulated them to think in new ways. They had never thought about increasing access or the need for more nonfiction for young children and reading the grant application stimulated them to pursue a course of action that they might not have otherwise pursued.

Finally, a comparison was conducted of Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) scores of grant recipient schools in the first group of grantees to a group of comparable schools. Comparison schools were similar to grant recipients in student demographics and IRI performance prior to grant implementation. The IRI is administered in the fall and spring of each year, so growth during the implementation year at participating schools was compared to growth in comparison schools. Preschoolers are not administered the IRI so they are not included in these analyses. And although 2nd and 3rd grades were not a focus of these grants, they were included in these analyses since many library staff reported older children enjoying the new books. IRI data is available through a public data base so scores for two years prior to grant implementation, the year of implementation, and the following year after implementation were analyzed. Results showed no differences at any of the grade levels between the two groups of schools at the conclusion of the implementation year. These results, of course, disappointed us, but upon further reflection it was conjectured that perhaps increased access was not achieved early enough in the school year for it to have had an effect. For some libraries it took up to 3 months to order, catalog, and shelve the new books. And a number of the libraries slowly instituted the two book per week check out policy over the first semester so that students, teachers, and parents could acclimate to the changes. It was thus hypothesized that IRI scores might not be impacted the first year of implementation because of these delays. When the follow-up survey results showed all of the respondents continuing the check out policies after their grants ended, it was decided to monitor these schools' IRI scores for a second year, thinking that after the second year the implementing schools might experience effects. But again, such was not the case. No differences occurred. We do not wish to "explain away" these nonsignificant findings, but we feel it important to properly contextualize them. Two books per week is insufficient access for young children (Krashen, 2004, 2007; Neuman, 2001), so perhaps with much greater access results would be different. But for Idaho, given the weakness in collections and the overly restrictive check out policies, starting with a minimum of two books per week represents a reasonable first step but one that is perhaps inadequate to impact reading achievement. In the future, we need to continue working to further enhance collections and to liberalize check out policies to ascertain effects on standardized measures of reading development.

Discussion and Recommendations

The Idaho State Legislature increased funding for the *School Library Access Grant Program* in its second year from \$100,000 to \$200,000. The increase was due to the empirically based evidence of need documented by the original survey and also the positive outcomes from the first year of implementation. We hope to continue these grants for many years and to continue working on how to better explore effects on reading development. The IRI is a quick screener that may not be a valid measure of the effects of this program. Therefore, in the future we would like to apply more sophisticated assessment models in a subgroup of recipients to more thoroughly measure effects, including such important outcomes as reading attitude and reading motivation. Additionally, we have tried to collect circulation statistics but have run into difficulty acquiring consistent data from all sites. We hope to work more closely with sites in the future to collect this important data.

For others interested in starting similar programs, we recommend careful selection of participating libraries. Selection criteria that we found important might include refraining from awarding grants to inexperienced library staff or those hired after the grant was awarded to a previous staff member who subsequently left the position. Additionally, even the most experienced library staff can underestimate the amount of time these grants can take, so discussing with potential grantees the time involved and where that time will be carved from already overloaded work days becomes important. And making sure the principal is fully on board is critically important so that all teachers are scheduled into the library at least once each week, and teachers know they will be held accountable to support the new check out policies.

In summary, our results corroborate those of Johnson and Donham (2012)—circulation policies

do not support early reading. And in Idaho most collections do not provide adequate support either, especially in the area of primary grade nonfiction. But because of credible, timely information provided by the ICfL in the form of a state-wide survey and forward-thinking legislators willing to act on the information, Idaho implemented the *School Library Access Grant Program* to address these issues. This paper provided the preliminary results of our work and they have thus far been quite positive, but much remains to be done. For example, we believe it imperative that school boards review their check out policies and immediately revise them so that all children, no matter their age, have extensive access to books. Such policies should not be left up to individual schools but instead should be codified at the district level so no matter the particular personnel in a school building, the policy is clear that all children will have appropriate access.

Finally, our research and grant implementation work revealed that elementary school library staff in Idaho are a wonderful group of dedicated people who work hard each day to provide quality access to students. But given the constraints outlined in this paper, we see the *School Library Access Grant Program* as just the beginning of a series of programs that are needed to realize the vision of vibrant libraries in all Idaho elementary schools where children, no matter their age, check out as many books as they wish as often as they wish from collections of such quality that even the most avid readers never exhaust the choices. And library staff need support from teachers and principals so they see themselves being rewarded and appreciated for their hard work. The reports contained numerous anecdotes about how excited children became about the new books and how they looked forward to their visits to the library, and library staff expressed sincere pleasure in these results. If principals and teachers also recognize these results, library staff will receive the positive support they deserve.

In closing, the *School Library Access Grant Program* represents an important first step for Idaho. Given the weak primary grade collections in many Idaho elementary school libraries and the fact that most were allowing only minimal if any access for young children, providing money devoted to collection improvement and prodding the schools to increase access were significant first steps for many of them. If collections continue to improve, other programs like book bags home (Williams, 2013; Zeece & Wallace, 2009) and rotating classroom collections (Gniewek, 2000) could become next steps for these libraries. Best practices such as these are currently occurring in some Idaho public school libraries, but such practices need to become more universal. And given our finding that many elementary library staff have been in their positions for some time, additional training for them about new roles they can assume within the school such as co-teaching models (Loertscher, 2014) would be another avenue for further growth towards a best practices model. But as was discussed before, most elementary library staff have additional duties outside their libraries, many are only part time in their libraries, so in order to expand library programming and the role of the librarian in many Idaho elementary schools additional resources will be needed. This is the primary challenge for the future.

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